

'ABOUT THIS BOOK

Baron Stephen de Montenoy, an immensely wealthy old bachelor, died in the early hours of the morning from poisoning, after a heart attack the evening before.

Who had caused his death? Could it have been his housekeeper, who had once been involved in another poisoning case? Or was it Claire, the attractive governess, whom the Baron was thinking of marrying? Or perhaps it was one of his relations, anxious to inherit his fortune?

In this excellent new mystery, Maurice Dekobra maintains the suspense in resolving all these and many other questions.

POISON AT PLESSIS

Poison at Plessis

A NOVEL BY

MAURICE DEKOBRA

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I

ANGELA entered the library with its four great windows opening upon the moss-grown moat of the château. She carried a tea-service on a silver tray and announced to the guests seated around the table: "The baron has asked me to make his excuses for not being here to receive you. He has gone hunting with Jerome and will not be back before seven."

"Thank you, Angela," said Cecile, the baron's sister, "I will serve the tea. We shall have no further need of you."

"Very well, Madam," Angela went out.

As soon as she had closed the door, Cecile exchanged a glance with her husband, Charles, who murmured, "You have done well to get rid of her, we don't want to be disturbed." Henrietta, Cecile's younger sister, helped to pass toast and cakes.

The Count of Villesec, husband of Henrietta, accepted his cup, silently. His face was pale beneath clipped blond hair. Lean features and high cheek bones gave him the air of a badly-nourished seminary student. Preoccupied, his little grey eyes watched his brother-in-law, Charles Tramillet, who had taken the initiative of this reunion.

Arriving from Paris in his shining Chrysler, Charles had at once declared: "The absence of OUR host enables us to talk freely. There is an event of considerable importance and of the strongest interest for us all. You will judge how the baron may receive this revelation that I

have to make and how urgent it is that we come to some decision."

The owner of Plessis-St. Jean, Baron Stephen de Montenoy, had invited his two sisters and their husbands to stay for one of their customary twice-yearly visits.

Charles Tramillet had left his factory in Courbevoie and his luxurious apartment in the Boulevard Suchet to hunt with Stephen. Charles was a large man, red-faced and hearty, who belied his fifty years; jovial and round-bellied, cracking jokes, the picture of high-living, he oozed prosperity and optimism. Cecile, five years younger, was tall and thin. A lash of hair prematurely white creased the auburn which carefully framed her face. It was plain that she was the wife of a wealthy businessman who refused her nothing, neither expensive massage nor elegant dresses from the best *couturiers*. Her meticulous elegance, her coiffure and jewels, contrasted oddly with the modest appearance and unassuming attitude of her sister Henrietta.

The de Villesecs, country gentry who were installed in a little house at the edge of the village of Plessis-St. Jean on the banks of the Loire, lived simply on the meagre income of Thierry and brought up seven children—five boys and two girls—who had come to "bless" their union.

Thierry put his cup on the mahogany table adorned with Bruges lace and watched impatiently as Charles sat slowly eating, piling jam on his toast and satisfying his hunger before saying a word. "Charles, I thought you had called us together for a serious matter!" cried Thierry, unable to contain himself.

"One moment, my friend. This precious Stephen has jam to melt in your mouth. Pass me the toast."

Thierry reddened, while Henrietta listened politely to the conversation of Cecile, the latest gossip of Deauville, where she had passed the Season and lost 300,000 francs at baccarat. This reference to her powers in the gambling salon provoked the merriment of Charles who cried: "Figure it out! Three hundred thousand in three-quarters of an hour. This mad woman draws always to five. She passes her hand where she ought to save it. She plays with her foot."

"But, darling, I only amused myself."

"Oh, of course. It is better to lose three hundred thousand at the great table than to receive three hundred knocks in the back room!"

Thierry cracked his knuckles, chewed a cigarette and threw it into the hearth while watching the toast that disappeared into his brother-in-law's mouth. He felt like shouting, "For heaven's sake, stop eating and tell us what you have in mind!"

Charles at last laid his little silver spoon upon the saucer, put down his cup, lit a cigarette and began: "Ah, I feel better. I barely had time to lunch in order to arrive here before five. I must compliment Stephen on the raspberry jam. And now I shall tell what I learned by the greatest chance in Paris a few days ago."

Thierry, beside himself with impatience, replied: "At last! We are listening."

Charles took a little more time to relight his cigarette and said: "It is about Angela."

Thierry straightened. Henrietta edged her chair forward and Cecile, who was in the secret, gave her a little icy glance and smoothed her coiffure.

"If I am not mistaken," continued Charles, "Angela has been the housekeeper of Stephen since 1946."

"End of forty-five," corrected Thierry.

"Very well. This good-looking Flemish girl, as our host has often said to me, is a completely devoted servant. Stephen prides himself on having her in his service. She is responsible for everything in the château. She manages the staff. She relieves her master of domestic worries. In short, she is a pearl."

The Countess agreed. "Stephen has never complained of her. In the countryside everyone is agreed about her good qualities. Isn't that so, Thierry?"

"She goes to mass every Sunday." Thierry offered that as a weighty argument. Extremely devout, intensely Catholic, he made his communion every day. Thierry was one of the most faithful parishioners of the church of Plessis-St. Jean. He had observed the assiduity of Angela in the service of the church and such regularity in the accomplishment of her religious duties had prompted him to bestow upon her a medal of good conduct as the housekeeper of the château.

He turned to Charles: "And why do we speak of Angela?"

"I have an engineer in the factory who made some study of an American invention related to electrolysis. I pass over the technical details. He remembered an article appearing in *Le Petit Parisien* in October 1938 which he wished to show to me, and he succeeded in finding a copy of the journal in question. You can imagine my surprise when, on glancing at the page, I came across the following:

A MYSTERIOUS DEATH AT CAMBRAI

On October 14, the residents of Cambrai learned with sadness of the sudden death of one of their best-

known citizens, Jules Sommerel, Commander of the Legion of Honour, and former Inspector-General of Finance. This functionary, seventy-four years old, had fallen victim to a strange malady and one so little understood that the doctor refused permission of burial. The corpse was examined by Doctor Legoume, the coroner, who has issued a report to the effect that death was due to poisoning by an intravenous stimulant: digitalis.

The heirs of Commander Sommerel have lodged a complaint of murder against person or persons unknown and the magistrate has begun the examination of witnesses.

Such are the facts which already excite comment in Cambrai. Certain curious details have come out of the inquest which we shall set down impartially.

Jules Sommerel lived alone in a small house on the Boulevard Carnot. Of a retiring temperament, he saw little of his family which included a sister and two nephews. He had taken into his service a nurse, Mademoiselle Anne Verstraete, who, for several months, had looked after him under the direction of his physician, Doctor Narret. Commander Sommerel was greatly attached to his nurse and if rumour is to be credited had left a certain sum to Mademoiselle Verstraete in his will.

Yesterday at the police station, Mademoiselle Verstraete underwent questioning for more than eighteen hours. She came away, refusing all statements other than to maintain her complete innocence of any wrong.

The inquest will continue.

Charles stopped reading. He looked from Henrietta to Thierry; then he passed the paper to them saying: "Now

take a look at the picture of Miss Verstraete in *Le Petit Parisien*."

Thierry jumped. "Angela!" exclaimed Henrietta.

Thierry looked again. "There is no doubt. Look at the nose, the forehead, the mouth. It's Angela all right."

Charles went on. "You see that Cecile and I have not made any mistake. Anne Verstraete and Angela are the same. What does she call herself now?"

"Angela Lepeyron."

"Naturally. She has changed her name."

Thierry adjusted his eye-glass. Henrietta glanced at her sister. "It's amazing!"

"What happened?" Thierry asked.

"Listen," said Charles. "Here is a summary of the case which I had my secretary follow up. 1. The nurse is arrested. 2. Dr. Narret, with whom she was probably sleeping, gave evidence for her on the digitalis and the likelihood that Sommerel had poisoned himself. 3. Miss Verstraete, after two months in jail, is freed by the magistrate on a ground of insufficient evidence to hold her for the trial."

Silence reigned and a strange uneasy air crept over the family council. Thierry squirmed in his armchair. Henrietta glanced from her husband to her sister.

Thierry was the first to speak. "What do you make of it, Charles?"

"My dear Thierry, it is clear as day," said the industrialist, leaning back in his chair. "The nurse of Cambrai has taken a new identity. Insufficient evidence in a case of poisoning proves nothing. In my humble opinion, Anne Verstraete poisoned her employer and got off through lack of evidence. Poor Stephen has hired a Borgia!"

"I can't believe it," Henrietta said in a suffocated tone.

Her sister turned: "Listen, my dear. You must always distrust perfection. Too much devotion is not the best recommendation. You remember Caroline, my maid. Completely devoted. After three months, she made off with one of my furs and a valuable ring. They picked her up at Marseilles. Can you believe it, she had stolen an emerald . . ."

"Never mind your maid," Charles interrupted. "We are interested in Angela. We are the nearest relatives of Stephen. Shall we tell him?"

Another silence intervened. Thierry, always cautious, asked the opinion of his brother-in-law. "What would you do if you were alone, Charles?"

"I wouldn't hesitate. I would say, 'Stephen, you have a dangerous woman in your home. Here are the facts. Get rid of her.'"

Henrietta surrendered. "Of course. We have no time to lose. Don't you agree, Cecile?"

"Yes. And you, Thierry?"

Thierry hesitated, then replied, "It is our duty."

Charles nodded. "We are in agreement. But we may be running some risk."

"Why?"

"For the very excellent reason that Stephen sleeps with his housekeeper."

Henrietta made a horrified gesture. Thierry seemed more shocked by the timing of the remark. "Charles . . .!"

"My poor fellow, either you are sincere and wear blinkers or you are incredibly naïve. It's plain as the nose on your face. For more than a year our host has consoled himself with this appetizing morsel straight from a Rubens canvas."

Henrietta turned to her sister. "Do you believe this, Cecile?"

"My dear, living at Plessis-St. Jean you must have heard the gossip."

"We never dreamed it could be true."

"Poor innocents!" sighed Charles. "Last summer I caught some glances between Angela and Stephen, but the proof came one September night, here at the château, when Angela came out of Stephen's room at three in the morning. An attractive piece, Angela; beautiful but dangerous. I can understand Stephen; she has the skin you love to touch."

Thierry frowned. "How shall we inform Stephen?"

"If you agree, I will undertake the job. No use embarrassing him with our family array. I'll find a discreet moment."

The others agreed. They preferred to take no responsibilities and no risks.

At seven, Angela knocked on the library door. "The baron has returned from the Hunt."

"Fine!" replied Charles gaily. "We shall have a good story from him." His gaze lingered on the rich curves of the housekeeper. Her figure was encased in a tight-fitting black dress, cut low at the bosom and revealing rounded milk-white breasts.

Dinner was served in the great dining-room, hung with tapestry and bedecked with spears like the hall of a feudal castle.

Stephen, fifth baron Montenoy, carried his sixty-two years with ease. Sitting at the head of the table, dressed

in a green hunting jacket and a white stock, a white moustache beneath his heavy Bourbon nose, and a dominating arrogance in his large square-set body, the baron appeared a relic of former times left over from the Fourth Republic.

The farmers, his neighbours, even those most hostile to the class which he represented, would willingly say, "Baron Stephen . . . there's a man!"

The owners of other estates remarked, with a wink. "Montenoy . . . he is a bull."

A bull he was with his exuberant vitality. A hardened bachelor, jealous of his freedom, incapable of being faithful, he had in the Loire district the reputation of an unrepentant wolf.

He knew two varieties of hunting: partridges and women. He seldom missed the first with his shotgun and usually brought down the second with his glance. He had clear green eyes beneath heavy black brows, eyes which knew how to overcome doubts and to put down rebellion. If you counted his gallantries between Blois and Angers, this reputation of a Don Juan would have aroused considerable ill-feeling had his generosity not been so widely recognized. But this generosity took the singular form of an interest not only in the victims of his own desires but in unmarried mothers and abandoned mistresses everywhere. Beggars were hunted from his door. He was pitiless when a poacher was caught. But when someone brought him a poor peasant girl who had gone behind the stable with a boy and had as a result fallen into distress, the baron did everything for the girl and her bastard.

Heartaches pursued him. In the château he gave consultations like a doctor of wounded souls who, instead of writing prescriptions distributed thousand-franc notes.

His original concept of charity would have assured him a crushing triumph in the event of a plebiscite in the Republic of Women.

The baron was rich enough to indulge himself in this way. His personal fortune was valued at more than 250 million francs not counting the revenue of his estates. He maintained at the château a staff of five servants under Angela's authority and led a very comfortable life.

The liqueur, a fragrant kirsch, had been tasted by Charles, a connoisseur of the good life. "Every time I leave Plessis, I have gained ten pounds. If I stayed several months here, I would not be able to fasten a button."

"It's good for you," replied the baron. "You are the darling of Amelia who cooks proudly in your honour. It is not like poor Thierry here. You would think he lived on prunes and noodles."

Thierry gave a sour smile. "My stomach does not allow excess. Besides, over-eating is a sin."

Charles coughed. "My friend, you will suffocate me with your sins. The curé of Plessis makes the round of the châteaux where he is gorged like a fat monk; he gives absolution the next day with the help of a little bicarbonate of soda."

"Our curé is a holy man," Henrietta protested. "If God has given him a good appetite that does not interfere with his sermons."

"Oh, to be sure. Do what I say, not what I do."

Stephen intervened. "We shall never all agree on this subject. Charles is a materialist and I am a poor heathen and Thierry is a pure soul. Let us give up trying to convert each other."

They went into the Empire drawing-room for coffee. The bridge table beside the tall open window giving on

the terrace was ready. Thierry gave way to the other four. He never played bridge. Card games were wicked. He began to read in a corner, furtively glancing down Angela's plump bosom as she served liqueurs and cigars.

The château was silent as Stephen and Charles sat drinking kirsch in the library. They liked hunting, the good life, and their ease. Charles, whose factory at Courbevoie brought him in a good income, had no reason to envy the master of Plessis-St. Jean. A self-made man, he treated his brother-in-law as an equal and made his joke about the Montenoy arms and the trappings of a great lord, as incongruous in the modern world as a sedan chair abandoned on an airfield. Stephen never minded these sallies because Charles was a good shot and understood food.

While the baron was telling Charles how he had brought down a brace of partridge and a grouse on the wing, the industrialist found an armchair and observed in a measured tone: "I'm glad to have a little talk with you, Stephen. There's something I've got to tell you."

The baron frowned. He was afraid that Charles might be about to touch him for a loan. He had no wish to become involved in his brother-in-law's affairs. Thierry and his seven underfed offspring affected the baron even more strongly. In Stephen's opinion, having his relatives at the château once a year fulfilled his family duties.

Charles read out once more the clipping from *Le Petit Parisien*. When he had finished, he looked at Stephen who had been listening with puzzled attention. He passed

the clipping to the baron. "And now, look at the picture of Anne Verstraete."

"Good God!"

"You recognize her?"

"It's Angela!"

"No doubt about it." Charles let him digest this astonishing fact for several moments. The baron rose and walked up and down, hands behind his back. Suddenly he paused and asked: "What more?"

Charles spoke of Doctor Narret and of the magistrate's decision which had closed this strange affair. "It was my duty to place the facts before you," he added. "You can act as you think best."

Stephen resumed his pacing. He came to the long window opening on to the park bathed in ghostly moonlight. "The bitch!" he murmured.

"My dear fellow, no hasty judgments. It may be, after all, that Anne Verstraete has been the victim of unfortunate circumstances. Perhaps she should have the benefit of the doubt."

"She has falsified her identity."

"Perhaps she was afraid that if people knew about her trouble at Cambrai she would have to give up all hope of a decent life. In any case, it is up to you to make a decision."

"What?"

"To send her packing tomorrow, or to keep her in your confidence."

"What would you do in my place?"

"My friend, I will not give an opinion and I will ask your word not to reveal to anyone who it was that warned you."

"You have it. Word of a Montenoy."

"Thanks, then. Sleep on it and decide tomorrow. Pleasant dreams!" Charles smiled and heaved his great bulk from the armchair.

The door opened softly and Angela appeared. Pushing the bolt she approached Stephen, kissed him and went into the bathroom.

She was already set in her habits. She undressed, bathed, perfumed herself with Stephen's Cologne and reappeared in lavender pyjamas.

Angela's features were not regular, but the impression of her face was seductive; her large blue eyes, her arched brows, her full lips, her broad sensual nostrils. Her low contralto fell pleasantly on the ear. Her deep breasts and her plump crown of Venus with its fine-spun maiden hair recalled memories of rosy Flemish nymphs; the thighs of a goddess, warm and supple. . . .

She approached the great bed and came silently to Stephen's side. It was the hour of intimacy. He whom she called "Monsieur le baron" in public and addressed only in the third person became simply Stephen. She began usually by making a report on the events of the day, like a careful steward. Then she strained to him and the hour of Venus arrived.

This night she gave an account of the installation of the guests and of Charles' chauffeur. Stephen listened to it all with half an ear.

"Angela, have you ever noticed one thing?"

"What is that?"

"Since you have come to work for me, I have never asked about your past. You gave a splendid recommendation

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when you arrived and have always pleased me since. I have entrusted my house to you."

"Do you regret anything, dearest?"

"You have become for me a treasure, but I really know nothing about you, other than that your husband, a soldier, died in captivity in Germany."

"It is the sad truth. You have seen his picture."

"But before 1939, what did you do?"

"I helped a friend who ran a sweet-shop."

"Where was this shop?"

"At Lille."

"Were you already married?"

"No. I married Marcel some months before the war. But why do you ask me?"

"Isn't it natural after all, that I should be interested in your past?"

"It is a proof that you have a little feeling for me."

"But naturally. In all, you have been a shop assistant, a good wife, and now the housekeeper of an old bear like myself."

"Sweetheart, don't talk like that. You know that I love you and that I give you all my devotion."

"What if I should fall ill?"

"Then more than ever."

Stephen gave her a sidelong glance and said pleasantly, "You do not know how to nurse anyone?"

"On the contrary, I studied to become a nurse."

"It would have been an interesting profession. Why did you not continue with it?"

Angela made a vague gesture. "Oh, I was not enthusiastic about it. My friend offered me a job in Lille. I gave up bedpans and thermometers for chocolate and bonbons."

They remained silent for some time. Through the open

window came the whisper of leaves stirred by the night wind. Stephen felt the pressure of Angela's warm body, the nipples of her breasts hard against the soft pyjamas' silk. She waited the moment of his pleasure. He was born between the desire to kiss her and the urge to speak out suddenly: "What did you do in October 1938, at Cambrai, under the name of Anne Verstraete?"

But he foresaw the brutal shock. There would be either an admission or a violent denial. There would be an immediate break; the loss of the best servant he had ever had; the end of nocturnal diversions with an accomplice who knew so well his desires and whose ripe body held a thousand secret joys.

So he kept quiet.

The danger, if one existed, spiced his adventure! He was not an elderly paralytic, after all, with his life hanging by a thread. He was strong. He was not afraid. He would know whom to mistrust if it became necessary. Then, what use to upset his life?

He took the lusty Flemish girl in his arms, as he had been accustomed when he knew nothing. His thirst to drink of her was heightened by the suspicion of an unpunished crime. It gave him the impression of playing with a dangerous animal and his taste for daring found a new satisfaction.

Angela gave a long sigh. "Darling, I am always so happy in your arms."

She enfolded the body of her lover in her arms. Her head flung back among the pillows, she seemed a priestess of love, waiting to be possessed, offering the flaming altar of her body.

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The twin beds of the Trianon chamber were separated by a gilded console table bearing a Chinese lamp.

Charles, in bed for an hour, was reading the *Financial Times* while Cecile finished her preparations for retiring. She came at last, remarking: "The reaction of Stephen to your revelation has been less violent than one might have expected."

"Really! Your brother is no chicken afraid of a shadow."

"It is not a question of chickens or shadows, but of an untrustworthy servant."

"Sweet, I have done my duty. I gave Stephen the facts, such as they are. It is now up to him. Angela is not in our service."

"I would send her packing."

"Possibly. We may see her tomorrow sitting among her trunks. But when an employer has made a little secret with his housekeeper, you don't know what to expect."

"I would advise Stephen to make short work of her."

"Be calm. You are his sister. I wash my hands of the affair."

"You wouldn't want Stephen to fall victim to his own imprudence. That would be unpardonable after what you have told him. Especially if, as we suspect, he is carrying on guilty relations with that creature."

"Why guilty? He is a free man after all."

"I mean his private relationship with Angela."

"Do you know what may happen? She will gain his confidence, then she will make him change his will. It is usually what happens in such cases. Once sure of inheriting a part of his fortune, you can imagine the temptation for a woman who is not perhaps too scrupulous. An accident can so easily happen!" Charles laughed

and shifted his pillow. "I can see Henrietta and Thierry dispossessed by the Flemish favourite. Your poor sister who holds the devil by the tail with her useless husband whose principal interest seems to be the making of children, your poor sister will have a stroke."

"Put yourself in their place."

"Yes, of course. But whose fault is it? It is this idiot who would do better to go less often to mass and to do a little work for his family. But his lordship the Vicomte belongs still to an age when to work with your hands was a disgrace."

"Poor Henrietta is badly looked after."

"The more so as Stephen does nothing to help."

"He has a horror of the children. He never invites them to the château."

"I understand that. This Thierry would ruin my appetite if I saw too much of him. But just what has he done this year besides go to confession?"

"He sells religious books and images of saints for a firm in St. Sulpice. It is the only work which he considers worthy of him, a propaganda for the Lord."

"And what does that bring?"

"Henrietta told me that he made about eight or ten thousand francs."

"A day?"

"A month!"

"Good God, what a life! To come back to your sister, I hope that, despite her acts of faith, she will not begin to long for Stephen's death; you may imagine with what secret satisfaction she and her husband would see this wealthy relative pass on if they were sure his fortune would not escape them."

"Oh, Charles! You exaggerate."

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“I’ll bet they smell danger. At sixty, men enslaved by their senses are capable of any foolishness. If the beautiful Angela knows how to navigate, I stake my money that she will not have played the favourite for nothing. . . . Sleep on that, my dear. I wish you good night. Tomorrow, I shall take a turn in the wood with Jerome and bring you back six rabbits.”

II

LUNCHEON the next day was served beneath a bower of roses, to the right of the grand terrace. Beneath a soft Touraine sky, the Loire wound lazily around the foot of a hill. The sun had absorbed the humidity of the morning and little by little each detail of the landscape emerged as if printed on a photographic plate.

Thierry, wearing his black alpaca with shiny sleeves, met Charles and Cecile at the end of the park. He came towards them like a conspirator. He was one of those people who take everything dramatically, and for whom the future is a crouching beast, waiting to leap. Although he was at least five hundred yards from the château, he spoke in a stage whisper: "Well, have you spoken to him?"

"Yes. He had his medicine last night."

"What did he say?"

"He said: 'Jesus Christ'."

The withered face of the Count looked pained. "From what I have been able to observe, nothing has changed," he whispered.

"Have you seen Stephen this morning?" Cecile asked.

"No, but I saw that woman going about her duties as usual. What do you make of it?"

Charles, having shot some rabbits that morning, was in a good humour. "I imagine that Stephen has said nothing to his housekeeper and that he does not intend to get rid of her, at least for the moment."

"How can he keep silent?"

Charles patted his brother-in-law's elbow, "The eloquence of the flesh does the talking, my friend."

Thierry's expression betrayed his uneasiness. The sunny morning was becoming a day of gloom for him. He felt that "that woman," as he now called Angela, was firmly rooted in the household. Despite the suspicion that hung over her, it would be difficult to tear Stephen from his devotion. Thierry was bothered less by moral considerations than the question of his interests. If Angela won, they could expect the worst. A woman who bewitches a man to the point where he disregards all possible danger from her is capable of capturing an inheritance.

Charles guessed the thoughts of Thierry. He had a fine occasion for making fun and he did not want to miss it. "What are you worried about, my dear fellow? You wouldn't be more royalist than the king, I suppose. If our dear brother-in-law likes to play with a loaded pistol, what right do we have to deprive him of a pastime which delights him. Especially when the pistol—if I may say so—has the advantage of filling a man's hand."

Charles shaped luscious curves with his fat fingers.

"Charles—please!" Cecile cried.

Charles laughed: "What of it? I call a spade a spade, and Stephen a gay bird. When a man of his age becomes mixed up with a wench who knows what she wants, what do you expect will happen?" And slapping his brother-in-law on the back: "I know what's eating you, my boy. I knew an old crock of seventy who had a charming little maid. When her employer died, the relatives of the old dodo were placed in a fine pickle. Everything had gone, farms, rents, titles, jewels; the little girl had picked up pointers from a lawyer. Today she keeps

her lovers happy with the fortune of the dead millionaire."

Thierry listened, blinking his little grey eyes above the thin blade of his long nose. He did not care for Charles' humour. He had an impulse of revolt. "This must not happen, Cecile. It is our duty to prevent such injustice."

Cecile made a helpless gesture. She glanced at her husband. "What do you think, Charles?"

"There is a way."

Thierry turned hopefully. Charles continued in a scoffing tone. "Find Stephen an American heiress who is not worried about money and only wants the baron's title."

"You are never serious," exclaimed Thierry, throwing up his arms.

"It is you who make me laugh with your anguish. If Stephen, instead of being a bachelor, was married? What could you hope for? A few crumbs. Don't become too bitter and things will work out. You'll see. One evening we will all five rise from the table with a dreadful stomach-ache and we will die in the night, poisoned by Angela who has served us toadstools."

This was the last straw. Thierry hurried off in the direction of the château from which were heard the sounds of the luncheon gong.

"Charles, you are not funny," said Cecile, reproving her husband. "You amuse yourself in making fun of poor Thierry. It is not kind."

"Ah, my dear, let me play. Your brother-in-law needs shaking up from time to time. This fine Christian is a frightful hypocrite. Anyone who talks as much as he about the Commandments of the Church ought to practise a few; thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's

goods nor knowingly keep them. He does not have his hands on them yet, but he desires them like a hawk about to seize a rabbit in the furrow. Cecile, I am not ill-disposed, but I would laugh like hell if he doesn't touch a penny the day when Stephen passes on to a better world."

The first days of September unrolled in complete calm. Cecile spent her time relaxing in a chaise-longue upon the terrace in the shade of an orange parasol whilst Charles accompanied Stephen and killed rabbits to distract himself. Henrietta knitted ceaselessly for her children, seated in an armchair near her sister, without ever disturbing her repose. Thierry read books, approved by the Vatican, in the library. In the evenings, the customary bridge, at a quarter of a cent a point—on Henrietta's account—reunited the family in the drawing-room. The whole day, Angela moved about, diligent and silent, in the corridors of the château.

One evening Stephen invited Charles to take a glass of brandy in the library. He came to the point without preliminaries. "The day of your arrival you made certain disclosures concerning Angela. Tell me frankly if the Villesecs know about this matter."

"Quite honestly, yes. After all, I am only your brother-in-law. It was my duty to talk things over with your sister Henrietta. I hope that you don't mind."

Stephen shrugged his shoulders. "Not at all. The opinions of Henrietta and Thierry do not interest me. Since she has married this imbecile we have become further and further apart and, although we are neighbours, I only see them four or five times a year."

Charles replied: "Very wise, my dear Stephen. Let me in turn ask a question which you need not answer if you think best. Have you spoken to Angela?"

"No."

"Ah!"

"That surprises you?"

"In view of your relations with her, I am not surprised."

"My relations?"

Charles warmed his glass between his hands. He said: "Come, come, old fellow. You take me for the village idiot. I have never mentioned it because it was none of my business. You are old enough to know how you wish to live and I would be the last to restrict your fun in bed."

The jovial tone gave Stephen confidence. He made an evasive gesture. "What do you expect, my friend? The life of a gentleman-farmer is not so lively. One has to make the best of the means at hand."

"Why not? If I were a bachelor I would do the same."

"I have thought it over carefully. Between us, Angela pleases me. She pleases me a great deal. We have been together more than two years. I am resolved to do nothing hastily."

"You are not afraid, then?"

"Afraid? Don't make me laugh. I have reasoned along the following lines: if Angela poisoned the old boy at Cambrai, she would have done it because she was sure of getting her hands on his money. A person of good sense does not kill for nothing. Is that logical?"

"As far as it goes, yes."

"Then, if she had millions salted away, why would she need to work as my housekeeper? There are two alternatives: either she is an unpunished criminal with millions and her presence here makes no sense; or she has not

killed her employer because the game was not worth the candle."

"Your reasoning would be entirely convincing, my dear Stephen, if you were sure that things happened that way. Are you?"

"Not yet, but I intend to have the satisfaction of finding out."

"How?"

"By making an inquest through an agency specializing in this kind of research. I am going over Angela's past with a fine tooth comb and then I will act accordingly."

Charles whistled and took a sip of brandy. "Man alive! She really must have you on a string if you go to all that trouble. It will cost a pretty penny, this inquest."

"I know it. I've telephoned to Paris. I can have it for 150,000 francs. But I will know where I stand."

"And if you find out that she has inherited?"

"Then I will believe that she killed him."

"And if you have proof that she has not touched a centime?"

"Then I will believe in her innocence."

"And you will be reassured?"

"Yes."

"Well, not me! For if I was in your place I would say: she has missed the first, she will not lose the second. You can't deny that you are a more interesting quarry than the old man of Cambrai."

"Charles, you aren't serious."

"My friend, do you know what you ought to do? You ought to say to your Angela: 'I warn you that when I die everything of mine goes to charity.' Then she will think no more about arsenic. And I would even add: 'sweetie, I will settle on you an income of one million francs a year.

When I pass on, you will have nothing more.' Then you will see your Angela take care of you like a pasha and tremble like a leaf at your sneeze."

Stephen shrugged. "You think only of the worst."

Charles rose and tapped the shoulder of his brother-in-law. "Don't take me too lightly. With a past like Angela's, you need a little insurance for your life."

As a precaution, Stephen had given a mailing address at Tours to the detective agency. A few days later, he visited the post office and received a large brown envelope containing six typewritten sheets. He stopped his car along the road and slowly began to read.

CONFIDENTIAL REPORT

Mademoiselle Anne Verstraete was arrested the 16th of October, 1938, and questioned for a long time on the subject of the care which she gave to Jules Sommerel. The drops prescribed by Doctor Narret were given to the sick man at night and in the morning by his nurse.

Mademoiselle Verstraete maintained that her patient, full of whims and crochets, often received her rudely and either refused to take his medicine at all or insisted on taking more than the prescribed dose in order to hasten his cure. In her defence, the nurse deposed that her patient's general state had affected his mind and that in her absence he had taken an overdose of drops which had proved fatal.

Sommerel's only relatives were a sister and two nephews. An inquiry at the office of the lawyer for the estate produced the information that the entire inheritance had gone intact to Mademoiselle Clementine

Sommerel. Mademoiselle Verstraete was not mentioned in the will and it was this circumstance which chiefly persuaded the magistrate to release her.

However, public opinion at Cambrai was generally unfavourable to Mademoiselle Verstraete. Rumours circulated that certain jewels belonging to the late Madame Sommerel and kept in a secret drawer in the house had disappeared following Sommerel's death. These jewels, worth about 600,000 francs before the war, were the object of an exhaustive search by Mademoiselle Sommerel but failed to come to light.

Mademoiselle Verstraete possessed no capital. She lived on her earnings as a nurse, about eighteen hundred francs a month. When she was released, she left Cambrai and went to Strasbourg, where she took a furnished room and lived very simply. She met in the spring of 1939 Marcel Lepeyron, a mechanic. The couple lived as man and wife for several months. Lepeyron had only his salary as a mechanic. In July 1939, Lepeyron left his job and bought a substantial interest in a garage in Strasbourg, investing 450,000 francs.

As Lepeyron and his mistress had not ten thousand francs between them, the question arises: how were they able to buy a garage and make an immediate payment of 450,000 francs? We have found no evidence of a wealthy lover able to advance such a sum to Mademoiselle Verstraete. There remains the hypothesis of the Sommerel jewels, secretly sold to finance the purchase of the garage.

Lepeyron and Anne Verstraete were married in Strasbourg in 1940. Shortly after, he left for the front, was taken prisoner in Belgium, and died in a German prison camp. Madame Lepeyron, without means sold the garage in order to live during the winter of 1941;

and we lose trace of her during the German occupation.

Madame Lepeyron next turns up in 1944 as housekeeper to the Marquise de Deste in the Dordogne. She did her job well and the Marquise gave Madame Lepeyron a splendid recommendation when, due to a change in her financial position, she could not afford to keep the housekeeper.

The birth registration of Mademoiselle Anne Verstraete, born at Rheims in 1910 and become Madame Lepeyron, has the Christian names of Anne Angela Verstraete; hence she adopted the name of Angela Lepeyron which no one would associate with the nurse Anne Verstraete of Cambrai.

Stephen finished reading and drove back to the château. Thoughtfully, he pondered the information contained in the agency's letter. He put the report in his strong-box. Although he was a man very sure of himself and one who had no need of advice in order to act, he found a desire to discuss the matter with Charles, the only person in the château with whom he could speak frankly.

After dinner, he found a pretext to catch his brother-in-law alone in the library and over the usual glass of brandy he showed the report.

Charles read it and re-read it, nodding his head. He put his spectacles on the table, returned the papers to Stephen and said: "Well, my friend, what do you think of it?"

"Charles, that is the question I ask you. I am myself involved. I would like to have the honest opinion of a man of sound judgment."

"You wish it quite frankly?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, you are no further along."

Stephen pointed out extenuating circumstances. "It

turned out from the inquest that Angela had no hope of an inheritance."

"It is possible. This first point is reassuring. But there is the matter of the jewels."

"An hypothesis."

"Certainly. But the deductions of your investigators are logical and one has the right to ask this question: how could a nurse, without a franc, married to a mechanic, without a franc, find the necessary means to buy a garage? Four hundred and fifty thousand francs would be a great sum for such people."

"True. But where is the proof that this money was obtained through the sale of the stolen jewels?"

"There is none."

"Then?"

"Then, my good friend, we are caught between the dilemma of the optimist and the pessimist. If you are an optimist, you will conclude that the mechanic had an inheritance which enabled him to make the purchase, an inheritance of which your investigators found no trace. Unless Angela had a wealthy secret lover who put up the cash. . . . If you are a pessimist, you will recognize that all of this is a fairy tale and that the former nurse, knowing the hiding-place of the jewels, felt that this little fortune was worth a pinch of strychnine for her old employer. I would also observe that it is strange how your housekeeper is attracted to wealthy employers: Sommerel, the Marquise, Baron Montenoy."

There was a brief silence. Stephen seemed to hesitate. "Charles, if you were in my place, would you be an optimist or a pessimist?"

"Personally, I would be a sceptic."

"What do you mean?"

MAURICE DEKOBRA

"Because of this doubt, I would imitate those asiatic monarchs who keep a slave to taste their coffee."

"You are not serious."

"But on the other hand——" Charles broke off with an equivocal smile.

Stephen asked, "But, what?"

"If I had a woman under my skin, a woman who has given me strong satisfaction in bed, I would accept the risk and I would say that many sweet nights are worth a sudden brutal end."

III

IT was ten o'clock when Henrietta returned from the morning mass which she never missed. Thierry as usual had accompanied her. In the drawing-room they were astonished to find four women who seemed to be waiting. Henrietta with her usual curiosity questioned Christine who was polishing the rail of the grand stairway and learned that these ladies had applied for the post of housekeeper at the château. Christine would not say more.

Henrietta went to their room with her husband, saying to him as she closed the door: "There's good news today. Stephen is interviewing housekeepers."

"Well, well . . ."

"It had to happen. Stephen understood finally."

"I knew that creature wouldn't last."

The Villesecs went on in a low voice. In the château, they always whispered as if they feared the walls had ears. While they turned over the possibilities, the four candidates paraded in turn before the baron.

They sat like patients in a dentist's waiting-room. One was forty-five, fat, a slight moustache, wearing eyeglasses and grey-haired. Her neighbour, thin and red-haired, dressed in black, nervously tapped her leather handbag. The third, modestly hidden between two windows, read a novel through gold-rimmed spectacles. She was very young, twenty or so, and looked like a student sitting in the shade of the Luxembourg garden between classes.

The fourth, better dressed than the others in a grey tailored suit, blonde, pretty and with a good figure, looked with interest at the paintings and art treasures of the drawing-room.

The baron appeared at last, imposing in his hunting clothes. He told the first one to come in. Ten minutes later, she came out of the library and disappeared. The second and third candidates had also brief interviews. When it was the turn of the fourth, Stephen made a sign to enter. She came in smiling and sat down in the armchair which he offered her.

For the fourth time, Stephen made a quick introduction.

"Mademoiselle, it is I who have put this notice in the *Lighthouse*. I am Baron de Montenoy, I live in the château the year round and I am a bachelor. But I have a god-daughter whose education I wish to entrust to some competent person. I will pay that person 20,000 francs a month, board and lodging and a month vacation. How does that strike you?"

"Very well, sir."

"Good. Tell me who you are and give me your recommendation."

Stephen observed the young woman in grey. Since the first glance she had pleased him more and more. She had an air of natural distinction, and good breeding. And the baron did not overlook her physical charms in happy contrast to the other three applicants.

She spoke; her voice modulated, gentle; her words carefully chosen. "Monsieur, I would have difficulty in giving you a recommendation, for it is the first time that I offer my services as a governess. My name is Claire Grandjean. I am twenty-three years old. I am a college graduate and studied for my degree in fine arts. My

parents died during the war. My father was in the Council of State and my mother was the Countess de la Rochie."¹

"Mademoiselle, your background is in your favour."

"May I ask the age of your god-daughter?"

"Fourteen, Mademoiselle. She is not exactly my god-daughter, but the daughter of an old servant who was at the same time a friend. I have assumed voluntarily the duties, let us say, of guardian towards Françoise who was his natural daughter."

"Natural?"

"Yes. I am not very sure who her mother was. She disappeared a long time ago. All I can say is that she had a little gipsy in her and Françoise is the product of illicit love. I would add that is of no importance. Françoise has lived with me since she was four, running in the woods, setting snares like a poacher; she amuses people who adore her. But she is growing up. I think it is time to take this little gipsy in hand, to educate her, and to direct her. In short, to produce a young girl whose ideal will not be catching rabbits but how to conduct herself in society. You seem to me able to become the mentor of this little wild creature. But before hiring you, I would like to give you a small test. You shall meet Françoise and spend a day with her."

Mademoiselle Grandjean agreed. Stephen rang. The young girl ran in, dishevelled, her face flushed and eyes shining. She had been feeding her menagerie of two ducks, four white rabbits, a little fox and three tortoises. She stopped at the sight of Mademoiselle Grandjean, then rushed up to Stephen and threw her arms around him.

"Excuse me, dad. I can't find Theo."

"Theo?"

"My duck, the younger brother of Dagobert."

"My child, don't worry about your ducks. I wish to introduce Mademoiselle Grandjean. I warned you that at the end of your vacation I would find a governess for you who would make a young lady of you instead of the little Arab that you are becoming."

"Oh, dad!"

"It's not 'Oh dad.' Mademoiselle Grandjean and you will spend the day together to know one another better. I hope you will get along. If you and Mademoiselle do not hit it off, I will put you in boarding-school—far away."

Stephen rose. "There, off you go. I'll see you again tonight at seven!"

Like all city dwellers, Cecile loved vegetable gardens. She went voluntarily to watch lettuce, carrots and green beans gathered. Towards noon, Charles accompanied her to take some grapes or steal a ripe peach. They were joined by the Villesecs who seemed anxious to have a word with them.

Thierry refused the peach which Charles offered. "No, thank you. It takes away my appetite. We have great news."

"The newspapers have come? They have lowered the income-tax?"

"Better than that. Just think, my dear fellow—Stephen is hiring a new housekeeper."

Charles hid his peach pip in a plant of thyme and cried, "What are you saying?"

"Sssh! Not so loud. Henrietta saw about ten this morning, four prospects waiting to be interviewed."

Cecile admonished her husband. "What did I tell you?"

Reason always triumphs in the end. Stephen has come to his senses."

Charles shook his head, incredulous. "A new housekeeper! You're kidding, Thierry."

"It is true," put in Henrietta. "Christine told me."

"Then the little Flemish girl must pick up her toys and go and play somewhere else?"

"Apparently. We ought to congratulate Stephen at luncheon."

Charles plucked another fruit and remarked with his mouth full, "Old fellow, you speak for us. You will know the right thing to say."

An hour later, lunch was finished. The coffee was served. Seeing a good opportunity, Thierry coughed, put his cup down, drew his shirt-cuffs down, and abruptly declared, "Stephen, I congratulate you in the name of your entire family, reunited around the table. You have made a decision today which does you credit and makes all those who love you rejoice."

Stephen lit a cigar. He saw his brother-in-law hazily, through fumes of smoke, "Thierry, what is the occasion for such solemn congratulations?"

"But . . . but . . . the new housekeeper whom you have taken on to replace Angela."

"Who told you that?"

Thierry hesitated, biting his lips. Henrietta came to his rescue. "Christine."

"Indeed! Your information is not quite accurate. I intend to hire someone, but it is a governess for Françoise that I want."

Charles gave an ironic smile. His scepticism was justified. Cecile and Henrietta looked at each other, overcome. Thierry remained open-mouthed. He had expected any-

thing but that. Cecile dared to question her brother. "You are going to give a governess to your protégée?"

"Why not? I have assumed a moral obligation for her. The least that I can do is to give her some chance."

Thierry found the pill bitter to get down. This sudden generosity toward Françoise seemed to him the worst of injustices when Stephen was totally disinterested in his own nephews and nieces. He could not keep from crying out: "A natural daughter!"

Stephen took up the defence of his godchild. "Is that her fault? If your father had an affair with a housemaid and you were the result, could anyone blame you?"

Thierry replied hotly, "My father never betrayed my mother. Please believe it!"

"Just a comparison, my boy. Concerning Françoise, her father is dead, her mother has abandoned her. I try to replace them, that is all."

Charles approved his brother-in-law. "A fine gesture, my friend. And when does the governess arrive?"

"I will decide tonight. It will probably be a young girl of good family who seems to offer the best possibilities."

At seven, Stephen heard two knocks on the door of his study. He saw Françoise enter, followed by Claire. They were smiling together and impatient to speak to him. Françoise came up to Stephen, put her arms about his neck, and cried: "Dad, Mademoiselle Claire wants to speak to you."

Claire described their day. At least she was able to say that she had enjoyed the company of her pupil and she was ready to undertake her education.

"And you, Françoise? What do you think?"

"Dad, I feel the same as Mademoiselle. I like her. She is so kind and sweet. I know I will love being with her."

Stephen patted the cheek of his godchild. "Well, that's that. Mademoiselle Claire shall be your governess. I am sure you are in good hands. I don't want her to be too gentle with you. You will obey her and listen to her instruction. Take care if you are lazy!" And turning to Claire, the baron added, "Mademoiselle, you will have a room on the first floor near a small salon which will do for a classroom. You will have your meals with Françoise. I entrust her to you. See what you can do to prepare her for life."

Claire and Françoise, delighted, came out of the study. Going down to see the ducks, they passed the door of the kitchen.

Amelia announced to Angela, "We will have another mouth to feed. The old buzzard has taken a new girl."

"I'm not worrying about it," said Angela.

"She seems to be a girl of good family who has come down in the world."

Jerome, who was helping Amelia clean the vegetables, remarked, "A fine-looking girl. She's got class!"

Angela made no comment. She observed from afar Claire and Françoise who were bending over the rabbits. Her lips were curved in a hostile expression.

IV

CHARLES was the only person at Plessis-St. Jean who saw nothing tragic. A man of strong sensual appetite, he accepted life as he found it and the world as it was.

His factory of chemical products at Courbevoie brought him enough to lead a comfortable life. After three years of marriage, he had first taken women where he could find them, then as following the Liberation he became more prosperous he had formed a connection with a night-club singer Dora d'Abba.

It was a relationship without sentiment, strictly regulated.

Charles who was not fond of scandal had made his capricious mistress understand that his presence in her life must remain a myth in the eyes of the world, an anonymous affair. He never called for her at the theatre; he was never seen with her. They had established a schedule which nothing must upset. They met in the afternoon, at her apartment, never visiting restaurants or bars and risking encounters with gossip-writers who would have enjoyed a juicy morsel on the affair of a businessman and a singer.

Charles had much better understood the case of Stephen since he was enslaved by the poisonous charm of Dora and her wayward sensuality. He had found in this Provençal woman with eyes of black jade, and a honey skin, what

his wife never had given him; ardent love-making which enabled him to go home completely satisfied.

Cecile knew nothing. No well-meaning friend had warned her. Her husband was always good-humoured. He refused her nothing. How could she think that such a good understanding was the result of continual unfaithfulness?

For two weeks while he stayed with the baron he had forgotten business and taken a role in the situation at the château.

Spurred on by Cecile, he had one day, between two hunting-parties, spoken to his brother-in-law: "My dear Stephen I believe you are at heart a masochist."

And as the baron regarded him with an astonished eye, he explained in a mocking tone, "Oh, I don't say that you have yourself whipped by women and take an unhealthy pleasure that way. I refer to a kind of mental masochism which consists in putting yourself in abnormal situations. You know, old fellow, that you have considerably upset your two sisters. The ease with which you accept in your house the presence of a woman of, let us say, easy virtue prevents them from sleeping."

Stephen had laughed dryly. "They ought to take down their hair with me on the subject. Would it be the presence of Angela which disturbs them?"

"Apparently."

"They first thought that this governess for Françoise was going to replace her. Now, they want to know if you take a perverse pleasure in entrusting your house to the heroine of the drama of Cambrai."

"Charles, let them think as they choose. I am neither weak-minded nor bed-ridden, Angela has served me no sleeping potion. I feel completely secure as a tough guy

who knows how to take care of himself. Then, if ever Cecile and Henrietta bring up the subject with you, tell them from me, I know what I am doing."

That same evening Charles repeated these remarks to Cecile who passed them on to Henrietta. They shook their heads sadly.

Angela cared little that her presence gave rise to all these secret conferences. She did not like the family of her employer. She was sufficiently intelligent and gifted with observation to have noticed that her presence at the château especially displeased Henrietta and Thierry. She felt the deep hostility of the Villesecs and guessed the cause of it. This pair of bedraggled hawks could not approve the presence near Stephen of a woman who had become indispensable and who combined the functions of servant and mistress. When she reflected, alone in her bed, she understood that she represented a danger for the Villesecs. They had a right to assume that in case of the death of her employer she would not be forgotten by one whom she had served by day and satisfied by night.

Angela had never raised this subject with her master. She had too much tact for that. But since he had made passes at her, she had considered what advantage she might reap from her acceptance. Angela, the peasant girl, had inherited the greed of her forefathers. She loved money. She cursed the fate which had condemned her to inferior, badly paid jobs. She knew what she was doing by buzzing around the honey-pot of the rich. One day this policy might pay well.

Her relations with Stephen were a good omen. The



regularity of her appearance in his bed proved that she pleased him. He found occasionally other distractions. But always he returned to her, more ardent, more enslaved, more anxious to taste again the experienced kisses of a woman who knew all the tricks.

Angela, well paid, favoured sometimes by little gifts, held fast to her place and watched that no one tried to supplant her.

The arrival of Claire was the first cloud that disturbed the housekeeper's perfect peace. Since the first day, she had thrown a malevolent glance in the direction of this young girl whose distinction was not the least of her charm. This daily presence was a threat. Angela knew too well the weaknesses of her master. His escapades with the postal clerk, with the daughter of the garage man, with the hotel maids of the district, with girls of the lower middle class, these adventures had no aftermath. But Angela was too wise to be lulled into a sense of false security. Further, the fact that Claire and Françoise were served apart by Christine shocked her. Why should she not eat in the kitchen like everyone else?

The remarks of other servants did not ease the situation. At mealtime, Angela presided at the table covered with a white waxed napkin. Jerome, Amelia, Christine, Nestor, the chauffeur and a kitchen-maid, a little backward girl named Thérèse, exchanged impressions. When the guests of the château were present the conversation took a gay turn. Each had his nickname. The Count of Villesec was the bell-ringer. The Countess, the frog. Cecile, for her long periods on the terrace, was the sultana. As for Charles, whose appetite was already legendary, Jerome had christened him the "jaws."

It was also Charles whom they spared most. The staff

was unanimous in accepting him as a "good egg." They found him proud and generous. He tipped well, at the end of his stay, in contrast to the meagre gratuities of the Villesees. Jerome had liked Charles since the latter had made him a present of a fine watch with a silver case. And then he was a droll fellow who spoke heartily, pinched Christine and congratulated Amelia on her cooking. He made no pretence of descent from the gods.

The coming of Claire gave the staff a new topic of conversation. The fact that she sat apart by orders from above excited comment. Jerome, never at a loss for wisecracks, had already christened her "the duchess." Jerome liked to ride over Angela whom he would cheerfully have strangled had she not been protected by the master.

He tried to arouse the housekeeper. "There's little Françoise in the lily hands of the duchess. She'll make a little lady of our Françoise. Isn't that so, Angela?"

As Angela shrugged, Jerome insisted: "Don't kid yourself. The old boy has chosen well. The gal is pretty, she's got class, she knows how to talk . . . she's been to the convent." Christine added, "You should see how she teaches Françoise to peel a pear with her knife, the little finger at a right angle."

Amelia chuckled while serving the beans. Especially did she chuckle when she came to Angela. "If I were you, dearie, I wouldn't sleep a wink."

It was one in the morning. The moment of love had arrived for Angela who glided into the room of Stephen. Nothing had changed in their meetings. Stephen, after chewing over the agency's report, had decided to put off

a decision. Either Angela had been a poisoner, a thief, or a devoted wife. It was necessary to have complete proof before questioning her about the money procured for her husband's business. An adventure with a rich lover was not a criminal matter. Stephen, for the present at least, held this out as a third hypothesis.

Angela found him in bed, deep in a large volume. She stole in beside him, as was her custom, and was astonished to find him absorbed by his reading. Other than books on the hunt and on agriculture, Stephen read very little. She questioned him. "Is it so fascinating?"

"Indeed, yes. It is a study of the political future, *Europe in Chaos*. It's not easy reading, but it's damned interesting. Claire loaned it to me."

Angela pricked up her ears. She did not care to hear the governess referred to in such a tone of friendship. She could not keep from remarking, "Well, the governess of Françoise teaches at all levels. Soon we shall have an evening class for the staff."

"It wouldn't do you any harm."

"No doubt. We don't have diplomas like this little flirt."

Stephen put down his book and looked at his mistress, "What has she done to you?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Then, what are you fussing about? Do you want me to put the daughter of a countess on the same level as the foolish kitchen-maid?"

"How do I know her mother was a countess?"

"I'm telling you. For the two weeks that she has been here I have only praise for her services. The little that I have spoken to her is enough to convince me I made a happy choice. Françoise adores her. Claire is bringing

her out little by little. She seems satisfied with her job. Everything is fine."

"Of course, if you are pleased that's all that matters."

Angela's tone offended him. He remarked dryly. "Good advice. In the future, let the subject of Claire alone."

Angela refrained from reply. She knew it was better to go softly and to bridle herself. She took the hand of Stephen and carried it to her breast. "But I wasn't speaking seriously, sweetheart. Forget about it."

Stephen put down his *Europe in Chaos*.

The 20th of September, as it had been tacitly agreed, the guests of Plessis-St. Jean took leave of Stephen. The previous evening, the family had held a final conclave. Realizing the futility of insisting further to Stephen, they had only been able to sound their regrets.

Thierry had a word worthy of him. "Stephen is a sinner. If he had not ignored God, Heaven would have opened his eyes."

Henrietta sighed: "We must pray for him."

Cecile made a wish: "May he not pay too heavily for his folly!"

And Charles, always the wit, threw in a final comment. "What did I tell you? She has bewitched him."

At the word "bewitched" Henrietta gave a cry. Thierry made the sign of the cross. Cecile shrugged and remarked, "It's not good taste, Charles."

But Charles had not spoken lightly. He went on: "You have never opened the little caged recess in the library that contains all the old books nobody reads any more. But I looked in one afternoon. Do you know what I found?"

A hundred books of all sizes and colours on the subject of sorcery and magic."

Thierry widened his little grey eyes. "Worse and worse," he commented.

Charles nodded. "Stephen never speaks of such things in ordinary conversation. But I am absolutely convinced that these volumes are not there by accident."

A gloomy silence ensued. Cecile suddenly took her sister's hand. "Charles isn't being funny. The situation is more serious even than we feared. My poor Henrietta, since you are living in the neighbourhood of the château, I beg of you, do not lose touch with Stephen. It is absolutely necessary that you or Thierry should keep watch on what goes on here. And if anything happens, let us know at once."

V

CHARLES had spoken the truth. Stephen, for five years, had dabbled in the occult. This pastime had begun at the time of the Liberation. The baron had collected works of sorcery, such as *The Temple of Semiramis*, *The Handbook of Hermophile*, *The Shining Salamander*. When he wearied of trying to understand the abstruse text of Van Helmont and of Helvetius, he dipped into the incredible career of Paracelsus, doctor, wizard, and necromancer. He tried to comprehend a theory of health based on co-ordination of the exterior world with the human organism, the microcosm. He read then of amphibious horrors, two-headed serpents born of an egg hatched by a toad, and of mandrake roots flourishing as by a miracle at the foot of a scaffold and giving off a diabolical odour.

It was at this period that Angela became the house-keeper at Plessis-St. Jean. Catholic by birth, she practised it little in her daily life. She was intelligent enough to understand the character and eccentricities of those for whom she worked. Like a chameleon, she adapted herself to the attitude of her various employers. When she was old Sommerel's nurse at Cambrai she listened with interest to a discussion of the ruinous financial policies carried on by the present ministry. When she served the Marquise at Perigord she became a model of piety, going regularly to high mass and vespers. When she arrived at Plessis, she

searched for the peculiar tastes of her new master. It was not a question of breaking into his study at night. After she had several times caught the baron deep in his reading, she asked respectfully :

"Monsieur interests himself in serious matters?"

And as Stephen asked questions in turn, she replied : "Monsieur, I do not understand a bit of it but if I had had the time I would have loved to get to the bottom of these curious happenings. The necessity of earning my living has taken me away from my studies. However, a strange incident in my youth has left me with an impression I've never forgotten."

"Tell me about it, Angela."

"It was like this, Monsieur, I was fifteen, my father and mother owned a farm near Arras. One summer evening, heavy and stormy, I came out of the farm to go for a walk alone in the country. I wandered along a great stream bordered with poplars when suddenly I saw a column of fire. I ought to have run away in fright, for you know the fear country people have for this fire which they think is of the devil, but instead of running I was fascinated in spite of myself by the supernatural fire which rose several feet above the earth. I was hypnotized. Suddenly I stopped short before a hedge where the fire faded away to reveal an apparition. Stupefied, I recognized the vague figure of Uncle Victor, father's older brother, an old man whom I seldom saw for he lived on a farm in Normandy. I heard a voice, far away, like a bad telephone connection, speaking to me.

"'Little girl, my time on earth is over. Good-bye.'

"Then, complete silence over the countryside. I believe if an owl had hooted, I would have collapsed of fear. I crept away to reach once more the farm where my parents

had already gone to bed. I woke them up. My mother sat up in bed and my father asked if the barn had caught fire. I told them what I had seen. They believed I had dreamed and treated me as a little idiot. But the next day a telegram arrived. Uncle Victor was dead; carried off at ten the previous evening by a stroke. In the village, when they heard about it, some said witchcraft and some said I would end at Lourdes with visions of the Virgin.

"That's what happened, Monsieur. I tell it to you for what it is worth."

Stephen did not take the story lightly. He was already familiar with the numerous cases of telepathic communication, verified by trustworthy witnesses and the physical phenomena described by the celebrated English investigator, Sir William Crookes. The baron proposed that he and Angela stage a seance in a darkened room of the château.

Angela realized that she had found the Achilles' heel of Stephen. With the most apparent sincerity she took part in the experience of her master. With a great deal of credulity, they convinced themselves of knocks from the spirit world. Without going so far as the rites of Babylon and foretelling the future through an examination of the entrails of a bull, they indulged in certain seances which had the fatal result of making them lovers.

Angela had watched for such an opportunity since her arrival at the château. Stephen was too good a prize to let slip through her fingers. One evening, while Stephen prayed, during a black mass conducted according to a ritual found in a twelfth-century manuscript, Angela undressed and stretched naked upon a pall of black velvet. Stephen was disturbed in his devotions by the vision of this superb creature whose body had a golden lustre in

the candlelight. The black priest fell into the temptations cleverly presented at his altar.

This was the beginning of their affair. Stephen found a perverse pleasure in this intrigue with the good-looking Flemish girl, whose embrace was shadowed by spells and phantasms.

In the course of the following year, their occult ritual made way little by little for a more earthy intimacy. The spells gave place to love potions. Their affair became ordinary but for Stephen remained a happy arrangement by which this woman looked after the cares of the household and performed the honours of the bed as well.

As Charles had guessed, the occult had thrown Stephen into the arms of Angela. He was not really bewitched by her in the precise meaning of that word ; but he sufficiently enjoyed her charms to put aside all danger.

Claire had performed the duties of governess for two months. Stephen had no more guests and his only amusement was hunting with the gentry of the neighbourhood ; M. des Ocelels, a wealthy importer of produce from equatorial Africa, who passed the autumn like an eighteenth-century gentleman, with a country seat on the banks of the Loire ; and the Count de Grasson whose title went back to Henry the Third. Although he was older than Stéphen in the College of Arms and considered of blue blood, he willingly accepted invitations because the game was more abundant at Plessis.

Stephen, who never restrained himself, did not fail to give this scion of an old family a piece of his mind. One morning as de Grasson had passed a rather slurring

reflection on the origins of the Montenoy family, Stephen came back with a prompt thrust, "My dear friend, I am astonished that you are here at all, since your ancestor was a pretty boy and it is wonderful that he was able to produce."

But Stephen did not hunt every day. The rainy November compelled him often to stop inside and to read alone in his library. Sometimes Claire entered and asked permission to borrow a novel. Stephen, not very talkative, gave permission without getting into conversation, other than to inquire if she were satisfied with her pupil and then Claire gave a brief report on the progress of Françoise.

Stephen nodded. "Fine, Mademoiselle. Fine. Keep up the good work." And he went back to his reading.

The evening of the Armistice Day, Claire lingered to look for a book of memoirs on the first world war. Stephen, tired of reading, looked at this lovely girl in the plain dark dress with her beautiful blonde hair which fell in waves to her shoulders. He thought that she possessed true grace and wondered that such a young woman, properly dressed, might be noticed in any drawing-room.

Suddenly he asked himself how he could have ignored her all this time and scarcely spoken three words a day to her. After all, she had undertaken the education of Françoise and it would have been natural for him to interest himself in her effort.

This evening, he rose and asked her in a friendly way what book she was looking for. He climbed a stool and found it in a corner. Claire thanked him. He suggested she sit down and have a glass of Chartreuse.

Astonished, she looked at him. "Monsieur, you are too kind. I am bothering you."

"Not at all, Mademoiselle. You are now a part of the

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household and I am to blame for not giving you more consideration."

"Oh!"

"I am an old recluse but from now on you must keep me informed about your activities here."

"Willingly, Monsieur."

Conversation began. Stephen loved the soft voice of the governess. She spoke well. Her cultured background enabled her to speak on subjects other than the education of Françoise. At one in the morning, Claire rose to leave. Stephen accompanied her to the door of the library and wished her good night. He went to his room.

Angela awaited him, naked in the bed. Stephen joined her. Neither said a word. He turned to his mistress. "What's the trouble? You aren't very chatty this evening."

Without looking at him, her head in the pillow, her eyes fixed on the ceiling, Angela answered: "You make comparisons. I do not talk as well as Mademoiselle. You have passed your evening chattering with her."

"How do you know?"

"I heard you while passing in the corridor."

"You have been listening at the door."

"They could hear you laugh on the next floor."

"Well?"

"That's all."

"Angela, Mademoiselle Claire does not chatter. I beg you to allow me to dispose of my time as I see fit."

"But, darling, I haven't said anything. I mentioned that while passing . . . Only, I think that you give a bad example to your household in drinking with this governess. It will have a bad effect on the others. What authority do you want me to have over her?"

"Over whom?"

"Over Mademoiselle Claire."

Stephen rose and spoke sharply. "You must realize a governess is not a maid. My attitude towards her is not as to a woman under your orders. As for your authority over Mademoiselle, let me tell you, it is nothing . . . nothing. Really, who do you think you are? My word, you act as if you owned the place."

Angela quickly suppressed a rebellious gesture. "Ah! That's a little too much!"

"It is just that. And for your guidance, since you know little of the world, remember that in a great many houses the governess of the children eats at the table with the family. Mademoiselle does not deserve to be banished. She has a right to favour. *She* is born."

Angela turned angrily, "Born! Born! We are all born!"

"Not at all. You people—you are produced. Mademoiselle is born, her mother was La Roche."

"Soon you will insist that I address you in the third person and knock my head on the floor."

"No. But treat her with the regard due her or I will place you under her."

Angela tried to leap out of bed. She was white with anger. Stephen caught her in his strong arms. "Where are you going?"

"To my room."

"Do you want your ears boxed?"

Angela, held by the powerful grip of her lover, wailed: "You hurt me. Let me alone."

"All right. You have a good place here. Don't make a fool of yourself."

Angela, with a kick, threw off the coverlet. The sight of this lovely body which struggled in his embrace, the

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soft female flesh, yielding beneath his hands, tempted him unbearably. Stephen threw himself upon her.

An hour later, Angela entered her room. She lay down. Her session with the master had given her food for thought. She realized bitterly that her fears had come true. She remembered the remark of the cook who had said to her the night before: "In your place, dearie, I wouldn't sleep a wink."



VI

COMING out of midnight mass, at the church of Plessis-St. Jean, Henrietta and Thierry met Amelia and Christine. The cook and the maid never neglected their religious duties. Henrietta took advantage of the occasion to say to Amelia that she would drop in after lunch to wish Stephen a merry Christmas.

Thierry also seized the opportunity to speak to the two servants. With a dolorous voice, he asked: "Now, Amelia, how are things at the château?"

"Quiet, Monsieur, quiet."

"And Angela carries on as usual?"

"Oh yes. She doesn't get along with Mademoiselle, but that's her business. Isn't it so, Christine?"

Henrietta broke in: "Oh, you are speaking of the new governess. But why doesn't Angela get on with Mademoiselle?"

"Because she eats with the baron, imagine it!"

"That's a new idea!"

"Yes. About three weeks ago the baron ordered a place laid for Mademoiselle at his table. She keeps him company. They talk."

"Well, well." Henrietta exchanged a glance with Thierry. She continued: "Angela must have been mortified."

"Madame, that's the word for it. After her own confidences with the baron, this curled her hair."

Henrietta and Thierry returned home. When they had given the children their few cheap presents, they entered their own room. Henrietta, full of the cook's gossip said: "This will come to no good end."

"You mean Angela and Claire."

"Yes."

"Stephen pays no attention to the warning of Charles."

"We must bring him to his senses."

"There is no fool like an old fool."

Henrietta and Thierry lay down. After some minutes, the Count observed: "Still it's a rotten deal."

"What?"

"The way he has behaved. For so many years, I've tried to get on with him no matter how he had disgusted me. But he does not do one thing for the children of his sister and gives a governess to this little illegitimate girl. Some child of the woods, no one knows where she comes from."

"It is outrageous."

"We can hardly make ends meet and that pig who has two hundred millions will not do a single kind thing for his nieces and nephews."

Henrietta lowered her voice. "After what you told me the other day, he seems to have thought of us in case anything happened to him."

Thierry shrugged. He replied, "No doubt. There is still a chance according to Michot, his lawyer's clerk, an old classmate of mine, who has violated professional secrecy for me."

"Can you trust him?"

"I'm sure of it. He told me in strictest confidence that Stephen had arranged his affairs. He has left the château and the income from his estate to the Institute for Meta-

physics. Why, in the name of God! A few million to Françoise, ten million to Tramillet, seven million to us."

"The fate of the poor!"

"Stephen may go on for twenty-five years. We'll have this money, after taxes, when our children will be grown up and able to earn their own living."

"Thierry, seven millions are better than nothing."

"Agreed, my dear, but don't forget that a will can be changed. Stephen can before he dies dictate another which will nullify the first."

"What makes you say that?"

"The way things are going at Plessis-St. Jean. I have my ear to the ground. The liaison of Stephen with Angela will go on. That creature will get everything. Remember Charles's words: *She has bewitched him*. Well, this bewitching will be our downfall."

"How is that?"

"It could easily happen like this: Stephen, led on by this creature who has enslaved him with her body, will one day marry her."

"What! That would be the end."

"It's the usual case. You don't have to be Anatole France to marry your cook. Angela holds the old boy in the palm of her hand. If that goes on, he will get older and sillier, more and more dependent on this wench, and she will put a ring on her finger. Then you can guess the rest. A new will with everything going to Angela. Our share will be exactly nothing."

Henrietta was appalled. "We must speak to him."

"Not me."

"I will arrange to get him alone this afternoon."

* * *

Stephen, Françoise and Claire took coffee in the drawing-room. Stephen was gay. The company of Mademoiselle picked him up; he got a kick out of life. The staff benefited. He was less brusque with his orders. He joked with Jerome, congratulated Amelia on her cooking. He became a real guardian for little Françoise and interested himself in every detail of her progress.

He gave presents to everyone at Christmas. Françoise received her first fur coat and Mademoiselle found a little gold wristwatch in her napkin.

Their conversation was interrupted by Amelia. She announced the Count and Countess of Villesec who had come to wish Stephen a merry Christmas. He repressed a feeling of sarcasm and received the pair almost amiably, ordering more coffee. Conversation turned on events of the countryside. Then Claire and Françoise retired, accompanied by Thierry.

Stephen, sitting before his sister, wore a mocking smile. He asked, "I trust you aren't going to tell me number eight is on the way?"

Henrietta protested. Wasn't it natural that she should come at Christmas to see her only brother? She added: "We think of you constantly, Stephen. No, you mustn't laugh. Last night at church I prayed for you."

"Thanks, old girl. If it doesn't do me any good, it won't do me any harm. But, one usually prays for a sick man. I've never been better."

"Stephen, it isn't your physical health I'm concerned about. It's your future."

"It's good of you to think of it."

"You know the reason. Since what happened here in September I have been concerned about you."

Stephen burst into a shout of laughter. Nothing upset

him today. "There, you've put both feet into it. You're talking about Angela?"

"Yes."

"And you're astonished that she is still there. And still more astonished that my entrails are not in a glass jar at the toxicologist."

"Please, Stephen. Don't joke about it. You have an incredible lightness. Anybody, knowing what you do would have done something. Common sense would compel action."

"Good old girl, let me repeat: I'm not anybody, and I've never been cautious."

"When you have a black sheep in your flock, you get rid of it. With your money, you would have no trouble finding a perfect housekeeper who would do *everything* you wanted."

Stephen approached Henrietta's chair and tapping her with his hand, like a father trying to reassure a frightened child, murmured, "She upsets you so much then."

"Yes."

"That's funny. No matter how hard I try, my teeth won't chatter when she enters the room."

"Oh, of course. The kind of relationship you have would hardly give you that feeling."

"Now, dear sister, you're getting into my private life."

"That may be. I don't give a damn. Why, the Count de Grasson has had the nerve to say publicly, 'Montenoy? Oh, he'll end by marrying his housekeeper.'"

Stephen shouted, as if he had heard a rare joke, "Think of that! This old monkey marries me to my servant. It's wonderful. Doubtless you don't know that this descendant of a pretty boy's bastard had himself a brat by his mother's

maid when he was young. Don't make me laugh. It's the pot calling the kettle black."

"We can't bear to hear you slandered like that."

"Well, my dear, don't get into a stew over Angela. In the years that she has been with me she has never yet served coffee with a Borgia flavour. But if you will feel any better about it, I promise you roses will bloom in January before we step up to the altar."

"You take a weight off my mind."

Stephen had on the tip of his tongue a sharp reflection. He knew what was behind all this solicitude for his health. But as this was his day, he withheld the Parthian bolt he was about to launch and said, jokingly, "Thanks for your trouble, old girl. I know how interested you and Thierry are. I am touched and to prove it I will send seven boxes of chocolates for New Year's Day to your kids."

Snow fell since the dawn of December 31st. A fine snow, light as confetti, which powdered the trees of the park and cloaked with silence the neighbouring countryside. Stephen had gone hunting with Jerome and returned with two splendid hares.

In the evening, he had a midnight supper with Made-moiselle. Amelia as requested, had broiled trout, cooked a rabbit, and prepared a soufflé in brandy; the whole washed down with sparkling burgundy and champagne. After coffee, he took the governess into the library. He had decided to speak seriously to her.

For three months, while Claire had been there, he had had leisure to build castles in Spain. This bachelor who shook off conjugal chains had never known any law but

that of his own desires. For forty years, he had had almost any woman he had wanted. There were none of them unusual, but that did not bother him. A man of property, handsome and titled, he never had trouble in adding to his conquests. The more so that he was neither delicate nor particular. The farmer's daughter or his wife, the consolable widow, the romantic shop-girl, the bird of passage, the café singer, vanquished by his fascination, he had taken them all without bothering too much about preliminaries.

Angela, stepped from a Rubens' canvas, was the last of this long series of women of easy virtue and mediocre character. The baron, proud of his ancestry, had never had an affair with a woman of his own class. Chance had never offered an adventure with a partner worthy of honouring the splendid bed dating from Louis XIV. It had to happen that a playful destiny sent to him a girl of elegance and birth, worthy of a better fate than that of a modest governess with a small salary. And she had given him food for thought. To satisfy himself twice a week with his housekeeper was all very well. But to crown his career with the daughter of the Countess de la Roche would be something else again.

The more he studied her, the more he fell under the charm of her conversation, the more he realized the refinement of her manners, the more he found her beautiful and desirable. What a contrast with the waitresses, the farm girls with their rough hands, the little peasants from nowhere. Mademoiselle had not mixed with the herd. She was of another sort!

Stephen thought often about her at night. When he had had his fill of Angela, when he was alone in the great bed, he was taken by a kind of shame which made him

regret his past. In place of the still warm presence of the Flemish girl he imagined the lithe supple body of Mademoiselle with her milk-white breasts, firm and perfect, that he glimpsed beneath the schoolteacher's blouse. And this picture awakened his desire. He made comparisons. He stripped the girl naked, imagining every detail of the young body that he had desired for two months, caressingly, like a patient tom-cat who for long nights has observed through half-closed eyes the little female he will one evening possess.

For the baron that evening had arrived. . . .

He had drunk three-quarters of a bottle of champagne. Claire did not abuse drink. She was sufficiently intelligent to guess the point of the conversation going on in the library, and too much on the alert not to realize what was going on in the mind of her companion. She already knew a few things on the subject. Amelia, who did not find her proud and sympathized with her, had confided in her :

"Ah! Mademoiselle. I have reached the age of discretion. Otherwise I would go like the others. Monsieur is an old rooster. I swear it. Sweet Jesus! He has taken all the chickens in the countryside without speaking of the beautiful Angela who is part of his furniture. One of these fine mornings he will take you like the others. Look out for yourself, Mademoiselle!"

Claire was old enough to look out for herself. She appreciated the favours the baron had shown her. She had even a real sympathy for the man, for this he-man who was not indifferent to her. But there were limits to familiarity and she did not intend to join the list of his victims.

Stephen raised his glass and with his air of the old cavalier, cried: "Claire, I drink to your health! You are now one of the family. Better than that. The family—my

God, you have seen them! I look on you as a real friend. A confidante. To be frank, I have no one else."

"Monsieur, I toast you also. May the New Year bring you all the luck in the world."

They chatted. The good dinner had put them both in a fine humour. Stephen went to fetch his best brandy in an antique cabinet.

"Claire, I think we ought to begin the year with this nectar of the gods."

Stephen watched the hand of the clock which pointed to eleven forty-five. He thought it was in order to arrange a traditional kiss under the mistletoe. It would be for him a delectable hors-d'œuvre. He brought the conversation around to a familiar note and came to sit on the sofa beside Claire.

"My dear, I am going to examine my conscience before you. I congratulate myself every day on my choice of governess for our little Françoise. You are exactly what I wanted. You are pretty. You have background. You deserve some attention. I swear I have thought of you for a month."

"Monsieur, you spoil me. Do you realize how touched I am by this beautiful watch that you have given me?"

"Oh, it's nothing! You ought to have all the treasures of the Queen of Sheba!"

"Why, Monsieur——"

"Then, I beg you, call me baron in public, for appearance, but since I call you Claire, call me Stephen."

"Oh, I couldn't."

"Of course, you can. That compels me to say Claire, quite simply. And I like this name which suits you so well. Claire, as your spirit. Claire, as your conscience. Claire, from head to foot."

"You flatter me."

Stephen leaned toward her and took her familiarly by the arm. "Listen, Father Christmas has adorned your left wrist. The first of January will bring another surprise. Wait. I will put the clock ahead a few minutes. Close your eyes."

Stephen opened the drawer and took out a little blue velvet box. "Tell me if this pleases you."

Astonished, Claire opened the lid of the box and saw a platinum ring set with a beautiful diamond between emeralds. She made a gesture of protest. "No, this isn't for me. I can't accept such a gift."

"Why not. You deserve it."

"No, no."

"I have never had so much pleasure in offering a present."

The clock began to strike. Stephen suddenly leaned toward Claire. "The new year has begun. Claire, come under the mistletoe."

Then he took the girl in his arms and strained her to his breast. He wanted to feel her young body close. He kissed Mademoiselle's neck and tried little by little to reach her lips. The modesty of Claire inflamed him. He had to force himself not to seize her hair, to throw her head back and lavish kisses on her. Claire refused gently but firmly. She avoided his lips and turned away the eager hands which enfolded her.

Stephen, challenged, did not dare insist. He dropped his arms and looked at Claire. He did not know whether to be angry or ironical. He had the good taste to conceal his deception.

"I beg your pardon, Mademoiselle. I have a little overdone it. I have two excuses: the sparkling burgundy and the champagne."

Claire resumed her seat. She observed Stephen who stood towering over her and said calmly. "Monsieur, I think there is a slight misunderstanding. It's best to speak frankly. I know your reputation and I know already that your amorous career has been a long string of conquests."

"Let's not exaggerate."

"I am not a little girl that one picks up somewhere. I know your intentions toward me. I am flattered. However, I must refuse."

"But——"

"But what? Monsieur, let us speak to the point. I am not afraid of words. You want to go to bed with me. Now, you will probably laugh when I tell you that I have never had a lover."

Stephen started, astonished. He murmured, "Can such a thing be possible?"

"It is more than possible. It is true. Oh, I am not a block of ice nor abnormal. Quite simply, I wait my moment. Now, I am going to give you back your beautiful present. I do not deserve this invitation to the waltz. And if my refusal is going to wound your ego, I will go away. I wouldn't want my presence here to upset you."

This direct language fell strongly on Stephen and aroused his male pride; however, he was impressed. He never doubted that Claire was still a virgin and despite his own frustration, he found in himself a kind of respect for her dignity. A woman ready to throw up a good job rather than submit to the whim of her employer, such a one was rare. Then, instead of indulging in recriminations or vain regrets, he sat down very properly in an armchair, opposite Claire, and replied: "Mademoiselle, you have given me a good lesson."

"I beg you. I wouldn't permit myself."

"On the contrary. You have done well to recall me to my duty. It is I who should ask your pardon. You are worth more than a vulgar escapade. I was not sufficiently aware of it. Now, let us sign a pact. Forget my exuberance of the moment. It will not happen again. But if you have a little feeling for me, we can become good friends. I like your presence here at the château. Our talks have become an important part of my life. Do you wish to go on as we have done?"

"With pleasure. If it is to be that way, I would be more than happy to remain near you, for I like your company."

"You make me very happy to speak like that, Mademoiselle."

"Mademoiselle? Since we are going to be good friends, why don't you call me Claire, as before?"

The gentle tone, the sweet smile of Mademoiselle moved him. He said eagerly, "Claire, you must seal this pact of friendship between us by keeping my present. I hold you to it. When you look at your hand, you will think that this little trinket is a pledge of my sincerity."

Claire rose. She leaned toward Stephen and said softly, "If you speak to me in that tone, it would be poor grace to refuse. I thank you with all my heart."

She kissed the baron on both cheeks. Stephen closed his eyes, breathing the scent of jasmine which perfumed her hair. He murmured, "You are adorable."

He returned to his own room and locked the door. The memory of the midnight supper with Mademoiselle drove away all other thoughts. He had held in his arms this modest virgin and this simple contact had moved him more than most of his banal intrigues. Those chaste kisses, but heartfelt, that she had bestowed on him, had profoundly touched him. He recalled her fresh perfume,

the beautiful hair that he had ruffled, her lithe body that he had held for a few moments. He had the feelings of a young lover. This flirtation had something new for him which intrigued him, awakened him and captivated him—all at the same time.

He was drawn from his reverie by the sound of the door-knob rattling. It was Angela, making her nocturnal visit. The baron was annoyed. He had no desire in his present mood to see her. He rose and opened the door. Angela stood there, incredulous. For the first time in years he had locked himself in. She made a step forward.

He remained on the threshold, asking shortly, "What do you want?"

Angela gave him a medusa-like stare. "What? What do I want? Some question!"

"I do not feel well. Go to bed."

But the housekeeper was in no humour to obey. She remarked, "It is your supper with Mademoiselle which has upset you."

"I have no explanations to make to you. Go to bed."

"You use that tone at this hour, our hour. It seems unbelievable."

"Unbelievable or not, I ask you to let me alone."

"You have never spoken to me like that."

"There is a first time for everything."

Angela had a wicked smile. She put her hands on her hips and said mockingly, "I understand. Monsieur is tired after his efforts with the governess. I ought to have known. These women of the world must be very exhausting. I know them, these highborn ones. They're all whores beneath their grand airs."

Stephen fought to master his fury. He wanted to strike the housekeeper. He stopped himself, realizing it was

unworthy of him. He replied in an icy tone, "One more word and I turn you out. You understand me. One more word and you will pack your bags in the morning."

Then Angela was afraid. The language of her master was more disturbing than a burst of rage. She beat a retreat. "I understand. I beg your pardon. Surprise made me lose my head. I take back what I said."

Stephen reopened the door. Always master of himself, he added dryly, "You do well. You can go back to your room."

Angela left. He pushed the bolt. He lit a cigarette to calm his nerves and stood before one of the windows opening on the park, blanketed with snow. He had already forgotten his altercation with Angela. The memory of Mademoiselle returned anew. He was no longer alone in this forbidding room, full of shadow and silence. A pleasant phantom hovered about him, invisible and reassuring, a pretty ghost who promised him friendship, a sweet friendship perfumed with jasmine.

VII

CLAIRE slept late on New Year's Day. When she awoke, she glanced as always with new interest and pleasure about her room: the walls papered in blue and ivory, the period furniture and the little masters of the eighteenth century on the walls. Through the glass door of a small cabinet a collection of miniatures, of snuff-boxes and German porcelain drew her admiration.

Her two windows opened on this peaceful countryside, so restful to see in a tormented world. She thanked her stars that she had found this unexpected position in a house where no one troubled her, where she directed the education of a happy child, friendly and lively as a puppy, that from the first had adored her.

Claire's parents were dead. The early loss of her mother had been a cruel blow. She had an astonishing resemblance to the Countess whose picture adorned Claire's night table: a picture which she would always cherish. When she looked at her mother's face, so full of dignity and pride, she remembered as in an old fantastic dream her months in St. Germain des Près; the students of the Latin Quarter and her adventure with Raymond whom she had met in the hot jazz night-club, Brooklyn. Raymond was a buried unhappy episode; likeable, seductive even, but not the man for her. She had cried at the time, thought her world broken to bits when he disappeared in

Marseilles. Now she blessed fortune that had snatched him away before she had made the fatal step of marriage.

It seemed to her that the château of Plessis-St. Jean had become for her a refuge where she could, for a time, live in peace near a delightful little girl in a quiet atmosphere and with interesting work.

At first, a little dashed by the cold reception of Stephen, she had gradually become accustomed to his rough ways. Then, when the ice was broken, when he had invited her to take her meals with him, she had enjoyed his company. The original ideas of this bachelor proprietor did not displease her. He seemed to her an image-breaker, a wealthy anarchist, who fled the beaten way and mocked public opinion. The least that one could say for him was that he mistook all ideas of patriotism, of outworn traditions, and of his own class. Claire liked his disdain for established things, for accepted conventions and recognized truths. She was astonished that this blue blood could mock with so much gusto the out-of-date attitudes of his own kind.

While she waited for breakfast that Christine brought up every morning, she considered the events of last night. While deploring that Stephen had tried to take her without ceremony, she was happy that he had understood so quickly the kind of woman she was. She would have been upset to have had to leave the château. Claire was proud of her spotless past. She had been only a poor student, and would have been able, like others, to go astray in the Latin Quarter; later, to have a few hopeless affairs with males attracted by her good looks and who would soon have thrown her over to run after new adventures. She had the Countess to thank for her moral sense. She preferred to live modestly rather than to sell herself to wealthy bidders whose cynical offers she had flatly refused.

This morning, with an almost childish joy, Claire shined the beautiful ring with its diamond sparkling between the emeralds. She was not ashamed to wear it. She had played fair. All ambiguity had been banished between Stephen and her. She had behaved honestly.

Someone knocked on the door. She asked, "Is that you, Christine?"

Angela entered.

Claire, astonished, stood up quickly. It was the first time that the housekeeper had presumed to enter her room like that. "What do you want, Angela?" Claire asked with her usual courtesy.

"To talk to you."

The face of the housekeeper was hard and unfriendly. She paused in the middle of the room. Claire's first thought was for her pupil.

"I hope Françoise isn't ill."

"It is not a question of Françoise, but of you and me."

Claire suddenly guessed the reason for the visit. She foresaw a scene. "Well, I'm listening."

The housekeeper advanced towards the bed. "Something happened last night which opened my eyes."

"Good heavens, what do you think happened?"

"You had supper with the baron, didn't you?"

"Yes, as usual. If you were not one of the party, I'm sorry, but there was nothing I could do about it."

"Oh, quite obviously. Don't shed any tears. For six weeks you have had your little suppers with the baron. You have a way of managing and this favouritism is exactly what you wish."

"Angela, you are completely on the wrong track. I do not know what black plot you suspect, and while I do not have to justify myself before you for what you call this

'favouritism,' I want you to know that the baron suggested the arrangement and I did nothing to bring it about."

Angela shrugged, "Tell that to others. Do you believe that I have not known how you have operated since you have been here. I am not blind. It is a familiar trick. You are wise. You hide in your corner and pretend not to notice your boss. All men are alike. They are aroused by fake modesty. It begins with a few pleasant words. You hang around the library, pretending to look for a book. The fish bites at the hook. You get into conversation at meal-times. Then, when the time comes, you play the game according to the rules to get the man."

Claire could not help laughing, so fantastic did the accusation seem to her. "But, Angela, you are crazy. You have a wild imagination."

"Keep quiet. Girls like you who pretend to be well-born, you are worse than the others, more vicious and more hypocritical. You said to yourself: the old fellow is rich. He is not in his first youth. It will be easy to take him for a ride. He is generous. He even pays in advance—with millions: you can make a good profit here. Swear that you did not sleep with him last night."

The housekeeper was insufferable. Claire raised her voice. "Don't speak to me in that tone. First, I need not account for my conduct to you. Second, if it will make you happy, get it straight that I have not slept with the baron, last night or any night."

"Then it's strange that he defends you as he does."

"The baron has not defended me."

"He did last night when I went to him. He acted like a man who couldn't endure to be touched."

"What? Last night—you saw him last night?"

"I have been his mistress for three years. Don't tell me you didn't know that."

"They told me. These intrigues do not interest me."

"Well, you are wrong." Angela took a step forward, scowling, and hissed between her teeth, "The boss is mine, get it. It is not a little tramp like you who is going to break into my territory. I have handled tougher than you. Now, I'm going to give you some good advice. Take it easy! Stephen is no chicken for your plucking. As for his bank-roll, you haven't got your hands on that yet."

"Your language is disgusting."

"It says exactly what I mean. I am not a college girl. I don't care to wrap things up in pretty paper. You are going to keep to your place and concentrate on teaching Françoise. Otherwise there will be a purge."

"Leave my room." Claire was outraged by Angela's threat.

"Certainly. Now I've drawn the picture for you, I'll go. You will think twice before playing around with the baron."

"Get out!"

Angela already had her hand on the door-knob. She turned towards the bed, remarking. "A little warning. keep this between us. Don't go whining to the boss. Because if I find out, it will be just too bad."

Angela slammed the door.

Stephen never visited his neighbours. He did not receive them often but when he invited them to hunt or dine, he did them proud. An excellent dinner, the finest wine and a mellow old brandy. No one could accuse him

of being an old miser. However, the company of these old fossils, as he called them, got on his nerves. He refused flatly to go to see them. He went occasionally to Paris or to Tours on financial matters, but never lingered there.

One day he asked Claire to go with him. She never went out and deserved some amusement. She accepted with pleasure. They dined at the Hotel Universe and finished the evening at the cinema. He took a liking for this kind of evening out with a girl who did him honour and he decided that they would make a weekly thing of it. The fourth time took them to Paris where they spent forty-eight hours. Faithful to his word, he acted like a perfect gentleman, took separate rooms at the hotel, and offered to his companion three beautiful gowns, one an evening dress.

As she did not dare accept, he insisted. "My dear, I want you to be well dressed if we should invite some of those old dodos who live near us. You are one of the family. You must look like the young lady of the house that you are and help me do the honours of the château."

Claire was moved and delighted. Never had she worn such an expensive dress. Her instinctive hesitation was satisfied. Going back to Plessis-St. Jean in the car, she could not help remarking with a smile, "When your housekeeper sees me so beautiful, she will be jealous."

Stephen was driving. Without turning his head, his eyes fixed on the road between Maintenon and Chartres, he exclaimed, "What of it?"

"I say that because as you must have noticed our contacts are rather cold. We speak only when necessary. It's just a point."

"It is of no importance."

"Of course. But you know what I'm talking about."

Stephen made a vague gesture. "The past is past."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen, my little Claire, let's not beat around the bush. You know very well that I have had for Angela, let us say, a more than platonic affection. But as this kind of escapade can't last for ever, I will tell you, if you have not already guessed it, that I have put an end to the affair. And I will even add I have done so because of you."

Claire gave an exclamation of surprise. "But I have no right to interfere in your private life."

"Let me at least have the pleasure of giving you this right."

Claire remained silent. The confidences of Stephen were important and flattering. She felt his right hand which held lightly her wrist.

"You do not say anything?"

"The least that I can say, I am very touched. Oh, Stephen—very touched." Claire dared to call him Stephen when they were out alone. She felt that this familiarity pleased him. Besides, he deserved it.

He went on: "You are, alas, correct when you protest you have no right over me. But when one feels something for a woman . . ." He hesitated, said wisely, "A real friendship should have some proofs. In revealing to you this detail of my personal life, I make you understand in my own way how much you mean to me."

Claire was silent for some minutes. This conversation, so unexpected, disturbed her a great deal. She leaned against the seat of the car and murmured: "There are men who are worth much knowing. Stephen, you are one of those."

This compliment was especially pleasant to him. He concluded, "Claire, do you know what you resemble?"

POISON AT PLESSIS

Those little creatures of the forest, fearful, and shying away at the least noise. They are difficult to approach. It takes a strong patience. But they are so gentle, so worthy of being treated with care, that one is happy to devote all his time slowly to overcome their timidity. Dear little Claire, I have only one end in view—to draw near you.”

Claire closed her eyes. Stephen gave her a sidelong glance. It was for him one of the most joyous moments when she murmured, “I think I’m beginning to have less fear.”

VIII

LIFE at Plessis-St. Jean unrolled peacefully in appearance. But an observer sufficiently keen would have perceived that this calm portended a storm. For three months, the situation had rankled. It was like one of those dangerous maladies which develop slowly and the symptoms of which are not apparent to the patient.

Angela had been abruptly cast off. It was a rupture without appeal, the end of the hopes that she secretly cherished. Her intimacy with the baron was a thing of the past. She felt a bitterness every night, thinking she had been put into Bluebeard's cupboard where her shade lingered among the farm girls and other easy joys who had filled the baron's nights.

She was the more mortified as she was convinced that Mademoiselle spoke the truth. Never had she gone to visit Stephen at night. Angela watched them. She spied on their movements; listened at doors; overheard bits of conversation. Nothing in the talk made it seem they were having an affaire.

Angela at first wished to doubt. But the evidence was too strong for her. A more alarming conclusion suggested itself. The Casanova of Plessis was leading a completely circumspect existence. He had broken with his past. To deprive himself of his usual distractions, he must have a powerful motive. And the housekeeper decided that the

baron behaved like this because of the governess. He must be completely enthralled.

She hated this smart young woman who kept herself inviolate while getting more than Angela had ever been offered. She no longer spoke to Claire. She even ignored Françoise for whom she had once done little kindnesses. The pupil became as obnoxious as the teacher. Their intimacy infuriated her. She suspected them of gossiping constantly about her, mocking her fall, laughing at her behind their hands.

Stephen had invited his relatives for Easter, as usual. They promised to spend a week at the château.

The baron had never been so happy. He was like a boy again. He never gave a thought to Angela nor any other little adventures of the flesh. He wished to show himself worthy of this pure young girl whom he loved so deeply. He dropped discreet hints to Claire. He tried to show her in every way possible how much she meant to him. Then he took a significant decision. He resolved to speak to her on Passion Sunday, two weeks before Easter and before the relatives arrived. He was impatient. He counted the days. He had prepared the way with a thousand hints, a thousand gallantries which touched the heart of the young girl. He had gone secretly to Paris to buy her a superb ring costing a million francs, which he had in his strong-box for the great day.

This Sunday, he took Claire into the library, after dinner, and said to her gently: "My little girl, you have been with me six months. I have had the time to appreciate your qualities and to realize what your company means to me. I am going to confess to you quite simply, without flowering phrases, that I love you as I have never loved anyone. You must have seen it, noticing the change

that you have made in me. You have transformed an old brute into a civilized human being; an old wolf into a shy and proper suitor. These eloquent facts ought to convince you. I love you and want to marry you."

This declaration was hardly a shock to Claire. She had felt it coming for some time. She was prepared. She had thought it over. She imagined nine women out of ten, in her place, would have jumped at the chance. Stephen was rich; he was titled; he had a splendid château.

It was Cinderella's dream, with of course a somewhat elderly prince.

She answered: "Stephen, you're terribly sweet, I don't know what to say. If I were a gold-digger, as the Americans say, I would throw myself into your arms. But you know me. I have proved that I am no adventuress, no light woman."

"That is exactly why you are worthy to become the mistress of Plessis-St. Jean."

"But I am weak enough to think of public opinion. You are rich, Stephen. Rich."

"In these times that doesn't mean a thing. Money melts like butter in the sun." He said this with a disarming smile.

"I agree with you. Still I wouldn't want to look like an adventuress to your relatives; someone who used her position here to intrigue."

"Your scruples do you honour, darling. But if you had been a girl of that sort I would have known it and we would not be here tonight, talking like this. But I've never paid any attention to public opinion and don't intend to begin now. We have only ourselves to think of. Have you anything on your conscience?"

"No."

"That's the main thing. Do you think I would make a good husband?"

Despite the difference in age, she had felt herself more and more drawn by Stephen's personality. She had never cared for gigolos. She let him know how she felt in a way most pleasing.

He cried: "Now, forget about my money! Fortune, which plays such strange tricks, has thrown us together. I am grateful. Claire, from this evening you are my fiancée. We shall marry at the end of the month. I don't know how you feel about an elaborate ceremony?"

"Certainly not. It is the deep inner harmony between two souls that counts. The presence of a hundred curious people has nothing to do with this feeling of the soul. I have always thought that my marriage-day would be one of strict privacy. Marriage interests only those two about to join their lives."

"Yes, we see eye to eye in the matter. We will have a quiet ceremony away from here. We will make the public announcement when we return."

"I hope I will bear your name with honour."

Stephen reached in his pocket, took Claire's hand, and slipped the huge glittering diamond on her finger. "Your engagement ring, darling."

Slowly she turned her finger, watching the dazzle of the pure flawless diamond. She realized it must have cost a huge sum.

Then they exchanged their first kiss.

The housekeeper was listening at the door with baleful blue eyes. As the pair kissed, she turned, her face twisted by hate. This time there was no doubt about it. The baron was going to marry Mademoiselle. Angela had anticipated the worst and the worst had come. Her throat dry,

her body shaking uncontrollably, she struggled to her room and threw herself upon the bed. She forced herself to keep a grip on her emotions. Her first instinct was some final irreparable act. Her hands clutching the sheet, she held on to some shreds of self-control. She must at any cost control herself; otherwise she would do some stupid act which she would be the first to regret. During her chequered career, she had known strange tragic hours. She knew by experience how one paid for impulsive rashness. So this evening she made herself listen to reason.

Her hour would come.

Stephen and Claire talked until far into the night. The happy pair discussed their projects. Claire loved the enthusiasm, the splendid vitality of the baron in whom love had kindled a youthful glow. He proposed a trip to the places one always dreamed about, Venice, the Italian lake country, Florence, Capri. . . . They would run down to Spain—Seville, Granada in the time of roses, Cordova with the oranges in blossom. Claire listened, head whirling. So much happiness threatened to suffocate her. Her joy was the greater for being unforeseen, a throw of chance as Stephen had said, and coming after a cruel blow of disillusionment.

They separated after making the tour of the Mediterranean. They exchanged a good-night kiss. Suddenly Stephen remarked: "I've thought about it, dearest. I'm giving Angela notice at the end of the month."

* * *

Angela was accustomed to leave the mail on the Renaissance table in the Hall. That following day, Claire found an envelope addressed to her, unstamped, and in a handwriting which sent a queer shock of recognition through her.

She opened and read.

"Well, here I am in France after lying low in Tangier for a stretch. You don't know how much I've thought of you, kid, and how I'd like to have you in my arms. I couldn't get you out of my mind. No kidding, baby, I've remembered a hundred times those days in Charley's place and the Brooklyn.

I've got to see you. I'll be at the Park Hotel in Tours, Wednesday at four. If you can't make it then, I'll meet you in Plessis at the Rivoli Restaurant, near the Church. Of course I can always run out to the château if you insist. I'll be seeing you, kid.

Don't let me down, Claire. I love you.

Ray.

P.S. Ask for R. Jansen."

Claire read this letter with a sinking heart. It was like a ghost from the past suddenly risen before her. Her first thought was for Stephen. He must not know. No matter what happened he must not know. This spectre of her poor student days must not be allowed to spoil her present happiness.

She took the only decision possible. She would go to Tours, face the music. Whatever he had in mind, it was better to get it over with. She read the letter through once more, the crude self-confidence, the assurance that all he had to do was whistle and she would come running. It was typical of their relationship; always he had played

the masterful male to her shy innocence. Now the tables were turned, but he did not know it yet.

With a sigh, she dropped the letter in her writing-case.

The Park Hotel was a ramshackle four-storey edifice near the station. Hardly had Claire asked the receptionist for Monsieur Jansen—the name Raymond was passing under—than he bounded into the lobby and gave her a tremendous hug.

“Claire! Am I glad to see you! Say, you’re looking like a million dollars. Come on up. This lobby gives me the creeps.”

He was the same, she reflected. Whatever his experiences, they hadn’t touched his boyish assertiveness, that air of “the world’s my oyster.”

“Come on,” he said, already propelling her toward the collapsing stairway before which three elderly spinsters crouched like cats.

She hesitated. He had made only one serious pass that night of their engagement. She had no reason to expect that he intended to get rough. She went on up the stairway.

Raymond’s room contained a white crockery jug and a basin, an unshaded light bulb over the iron bed, and a few religious mottoes on the brown-papered wall. It was inexpressibly dreary.

“Some dump, eh?” he said with a wave of his hand. “Cigarette?”

She had said nothing. Thoughtfully she accepted a cigarette. She noticed his threadbare cuffs. The shine of his double-breasted blue suit. In one corner stood a battered valise, tied with rope.

"Well, kid," he said, puffing rapidly, "let's begin at the beginning. You can't imagine what I've been through and what I've suffered. And the worst of it, I didn't know what was with you. I couldn't get word to you."

Claire said calmly. "I heard indirectly. A detective from Police Headquarters came to see me."

He was silent, walking rapidly up and down, the muscles of his face jerking. Suddenly he turned. "Listen, Claire, I was framed. Get it? A pal of mine, Bob Duval, turned out to be a dope pedlar. They were after him and he skipped. The coppers tried to hang it on me. Me!" He gave her a hurt, indignant look. "Of all the dirty deals. I had to clear out of Marseilles and hotfoot it to Spain. Later I heard they'd picked up Bob and made him sing. They had the goods on him and the rat squealed on everyone. Of course I've made a few little transactions for friends in jewels and perfume. But I never touched dope. You've got to believe me, kid." His voice took on a note of shocked protest. He nodded insistently. "You believe me, don't you?"

"What does it matter?" she said wearily; the sordid little room, menacing in its poverty, getting on her nerves; the unnecessary and futile explanations of an incident which no longer mattered.

"You've got to believe me, Claire. I swear I've never touched the stuff." He was pleading now, seizing her hand and carrying it to his lips.

She took her hand away. "Why do you go under another name, then?"

"Just a little precaution, sweetheart. Christ knows what Bob has told the bulls. It would be like him to blame me for everything. I might be a dead pigeon the day I landed in France. The boys at Tangier fixed me up with

a new passport. R. Jansen, born in Antwerp. A good deal, wasn't it?"

She looked at him. As always he required admiration. "Yes, Raymond, a good deal." She sighed. "Why are you here?"

"To see you."

She shrugged. He went on. "From Tangier I went to Switzerland where I had some dough. I've passed a few cheques." He implied this was a small matter; a temporary affair of credit. "Look, baby. I've got you on the brain. We'll get married and have a honeymoon in Biarritz. I've got friends there."

"More exporters?" She could not repress the sarcasm.

"Don't be like that, honey. You don't know what I've been through."

Claire gave him a white, sad smile.

"Listen. I've got dough sunk in something big. It's my best chance. We'll be rich. Rich! All I need is a few million more."

"What a pity."

He came close, breathing quickly; the odour of cheap whisky hung about him. "Kid, I've dreamed of you night and day. I've prayed for the chance to see you again. You can't let me down now." He seized her wrist. "What about this old boy you work for? He's got plenty, isn't it true?"

"I am a governess at Plessis, Raymond." She looked at him steadily, wondered how they could ever have loved, what fled magic had been between them.

"What's a million or two to him?" he said contemptuously. "He'd never miss it. Just the price of a new toy for this old sugar daddy."

She flushed; her palms sweating. She put her hands away.

"I've heard things about you, kid." He gave her a solemn wink. "They say this baron is cuckoo about you. He's asked you to marry him."

Claire heard a faint far-off ringing; oh, the bells of heaven in another day, long ago. She knew herself whisper. "Yes, it's true."

He clapped his hands together—the boy for whom the birthday cake is waiting. "Good old Claire! You know how to play your cards!"

"You have no reason to reproach me." Her voice was level.

Raymond was bending down, kissing her wrist. His black hair glistened with brilliantine. "Of course, baby. I'm not saying a word against you."

Claire made an abrupt movement. His lips on her flesh caused a quiver of revulsion through her. Pale, she leaned against the ancient ruined wardrobe. "I must go, Raymond. We—we are quite free now. We have no claims on each other."

Raymond stared at her; dark liquid eyes, a gipsy. "Wait, Claire. We haven't finished."

"No?"

"No. When I was in the chips, I didn't mind spending on the poor student of the Sorbonne. Remember kid? Well, it's the other way around. You've got the dough and I——" he looked with distaste at the miserable trappings of his room.

"What do you mean?" She spoke calmly, but her heart was beating with hammer strokes.

"Simple arithmetic, sweetheart. I'm living in a dump with hardly the price of a ticket to Paris. I've got to have dough. One or two million will pull me out of this jam. Naturally I thought of you."

She gave a bitter smile. "With my wages as governess?"

Raymond laughed. "Chicken feed. Wise up, baby, you're going to be the wife of a rich old crock you can twist around your finger." His eyes suddenly narrowed. With his tanned face and brilliantined hair, there was something Arabic about him.

She turned away, trembling.

"Listen, kid. This deal at Biarritz is a sure thing. I need two millions cash. I'll put up twenty-five per cent of the stock. You can't miss."

She was drawing on her gloves. "I must go, Raymond." She couldn't hear any more. Everything was broken; all their memories. She wondered if the other Raymond—so careless and laughing they were—had ever really existed.

He was between her and the door. "You've got to give me a chance. Listen, the company's sound. Importing precious metals, tungsten and aluminium. The investors can't lose. It's an opportunity. What do you say, kid?"

She looked about, helplessly. She saw him as in a far off dream waiting there before her. Clouds of stale cigarette smoke hung in the room. A half-empty bottle stood on the dressing-table. The horrible brown-papered walls seemed to press upon her.

"Twenty-five per cent," he was saying. "A sure thing. Just tell the old boy, Jansen's an old friend of mine, his word is as good as gold. You'll have an investment for life."

She groped towards the door. Suddenly he seized her arm. "You're not going?"

"Please, Raymond. It's no use."

"Listen, sweetheart. Is it my fault that I've had a run of bad luck? I'll pull out of it. All I need is one or two friends."

POISON AT PLESSIS

He was pleading; she knew the familiar boyish tone: "Everything will be all right, you know me, kid." And all the time something lay smashed to bits within her; some pieces of her youth, like rare blue porcelain, that she could never put together again.

"Good-bye, Raymond."

"Wait a minute, kid. Think it over. Let me know in a couple of days."

She went on down the leaning stairway, past three whispering old ladies, the oily smirking receptionist . . . she was in the street and walking very fast and only then did she realize she was crying.

IX

CLAIRE who had lived in the vain hope of never speaking again with Raymond had just given a history lesson to Françoise in their classroom. It was four o'clock. She met Angela in the Hall. The house-keeper came toward her and gave her an envelope, saying: "Here is a letter which has just been found in the box by Jerome. He handed it to me because it is marked *urgent*. He saw the man who brought it drop it into the box and run away in the direction of the wood."

Claire, very disturbed, took the letter and exclaimed: "Oh, yes. It is the brother of one of my student friends at Paris. It is not so very pressing. Thanks, Angela."

Claire went into the drawing-room to read the letter.

"My little Claire:

It's been three days since our little chat at the Park Hotel and there's not been a sign of life out of you. Now I think it's about time we had another talk. I'm here in Plessis and will meet you in the park, beside the pavilion, at six.

Don't let me down, kid. I'm counting on you.

Ray."

She knew that if she failed this rendezvous, he would come to the château; there would be a scene and Angela no doubt listening.

At six she went out and walked toward the pavilion

which stood near the wall, partly hidden by trees. Claire climbed to the second floor and opened a window which gave on the surrounding countryside. She saw him slinking along the wall, hat pulled over one eye, cigarette drooping from his lip; a carbon of a Hollywood "con" man.

She went down and opened the small wooden gate. Raymond came in nodding and smiling. "I knew you wouldn't fail me."

They entered the single large room of the hunting lodge, with silver cups and antlered head prominently displayed. Twilight was coming on and they could barely see one another in the gloom.

"We mustn't light the lamp," Claire whispered. "They can see us in here."

Raymond smiled. "We wouldn't want the baron to know you were alone with another man."

She turned. "Why have you come here?"

"To hear what you have to say to my little proposition."

"I told you it made no sense. You're wasting your time."

Raymond came close. She could smell the whisky. His voice was suddenly loud and arrogant. "Listen, kid, don't hand me that. You're in a soft spot. Your benefactor is filthy with dough. He'll never notice two millions." His tone dropped; he gave a little chuckle. "See here, babe, you don't need to worry. I'll take care of you. We'll split."

She fought for control. The scene increasingly unreal, fantastic; a page out of a child's nursery book with monsters and princes bewitched and somewhere the little twinkling light of the good fairy. . . .

He was telling her about his Import Company. She

caught the words "molybdenum" and "barium." Then he said: "but this is only a sideshow. The real dough is in a little deal I've made with some boys at Tangier. They're real live wires, gold and precious stones in their racket. They've been operating for years and the pay-off is more than two hundred per cent profit. Two hundred per cent! Where could your sugar daddy find that in his gilt-edged stuff? It's like picking it off trees!"

"And you want me to get Stephen mixed up in something like that?"

"I'm doing you and Steve a favour. This racket is worth millions!"

She tried to bring him back to earth. She saw that he believed in his lies; his pot of gold and rainbow. "No, Raymond. Quite definitely. We'll have nothing to do with it." She could not keep the disdain, the moral quiver out of her voice; the Countess coming back, refusing some shady suggestion from a bourgeois trader.

He caught her; one hand on his hip, his voice harsh and flat. He looked in the shadows like a street-corner arab with a pocketful of black-market dollars. "So, we've gone too high and mighty for the likes of Raymond! We don't want to be soiled by such contacts. Well, let me tell you, nobody but a fool works for a living these days. I need dough and I'm not worried where it comes from. I'll take my own chances. I haven't had a fortune drop into my lap like your old crock. I've got to look out for myself. And, kid, you're going to help me. *For your own sake.*"

"Even if Monsieur Montenoy would accept, I should not wish to have anything to do with such traffic."

His eyes narrowed. He was turning nasty, the smell of the streets coming out. "I'm not talking about your cut. There are other reasons. Your marriage, for instance."

"What do you mean?"

"It's quite simple, baby. You play ball with me, because if you don't I will have to get tough." He glowered in the gloom; cigarette pasted in one corner of his mouth. Choking she said: "I'm not afraid of you."

Suddenly he gave a little smile. "Don't be too sure, sister. If you're going to forget old friends like that, you're asking for it."

"I haven't done anything. I have nothing to reproach myself with." She was conscious of her weakness; it didn't matter that one had been good. With him, inevitably, it had become something secret and shameful.

"Don't kid yourself. You're overlooking one little detail. In your delirium of happiness to be engaged with this Mister Gotrocks, you forget certain little items of the past. There was a young student who had a gift of gab. Not only in talk, but in *writing*, baby. You sent me letters on the subject of our wedding night. I have them all, tied up in a lavender ribbon. Don't you think our dear Stephen would like to take a peep at this past of his precious babe?"

He was very near; staring out of dark velvet eyes, like a gigantic cat waiting to pounce.

"Think it over, kid. I could send along a short note of explanation. Something about how this pure creature who wouldn't be touched without a ring got away with plenty in the Latin Quarter. And how she ditched her fiancé, a poor young student, for a pile of dough. Oh, it'll look pretty, baby."

Claire was seized with a spasm of disgust. He was unrecognizable, his manhood tarred in unknown irreparable ways. He was devoured by a lust for money, thinking of it constantly, as a lover thought of his mistress,

devising small dreadful plots—nothing too cheap or dishonourable. He nauseated her.

Raymond saw her recoil from him, saw the horror in her look. He laughed. "If I'm bad, baby, it's on your head. I gave you a chance to let bygones be bygones and be friends. You didn't want it. So we had to get a little rough. Now I'm going to give you a little advice. You have until next Saturday to make up your mind. You will know how to fix it up with Steve." He gave her a wink, nodded. "I know what the old boy wants. All you've got to do is play your cards right. You've got him in the hollow of your hand."

Claire swayed; felt herself hanging on the door. She shook uncontrollably. She had not known men like Raymond could fall so low. Choking, she said: "Go away. Go away. I can't bear you."

Raymond shrugged. "Okay, kid. I'll be hearing from you. Next Saturday, remember."

She went out. Night had fallen. Slowly she walked toward the glimmering lights of the château. About fifty yards from the terrace, she heard a rustling of dry leaves. She stopped short, her heart pounding. Had she been followed?

She remained rooted for several moments. No further noise occurred. Her eyes, accustomed to the dark, saw no moving shadows. Some small animal had crossed her path, no doubt. She went on towards the château.

Next Monday, Stephen found two letters in his mail. In one Cecile announced her arrival at Plessis the eve of Good Friday. The other was anonymous. Stephen

POISON AT PLESSIS

surprised, read on a single sheet folded in four the following message printed in capitals:

“MONSIEUR :

ALL THOSE WHO KNOW YOU ARE ASTONISHED TO SEE YOU GOING OUT WITH YOUR GOVERNESS. THEY FEEL THAT YOU HAVE BEEN IMPOSED UPON. YOU HAVE FALLEN UNDER THE FASCINATION OF THIS GIRL WHO SINCE SHE HAS BEEN WITH YOU HAS DRAWN YOU INTO HER NET. LET A FRIEND WHO THINKS ONLY OF YOUR GOOD OPEN YOUR EYES BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE.

YOUR MADEMOISELLE, WHO HAS PLAYED A COMEDY WITH HER VIRTUE AND VIRGINITY, IS REALLY NOTHING BUT AN ADVENTURESS.

THIS GIRL HAS WORMED HER WAY INTO YOUR GOOD GRACES. SHE HAS PLAYED WELL. BUT SHE IS NOT ABLE TO FOOL OTHERS.

THE UNDERSIGNED CAN VOUCH THAT YOUR GOVERNESS IS NOT PLAYING HARD TO GET BEHIND YOUR BACK. A HANDSOME BOY WHO HAS CERTAINLY NOT COME TO PICK STRAWBERRIES HAS BEEN SEEN WANDERING AROUND YOUR PARK NEAR THE PAVILION. A YOUNG GIRL WAS ALSO SEEN WHO MET THIS BOY BEYOND THE SIGHT OF THE CHÂTEAU AND THIS GIRL LOOKED AS MUCH LIKE YOUR MADEMOISELLE AS TWO PEAS IN A POD.

THE SPECTACLE OF A DISTINGUISHED OLD MAN BEING TRAPPED BY A YOUNG INTRIGUER IS ALWAYS A SAD ONE.
A FRIEND.”

Stephen read the letter several times. Not being a famous man, nor a film star, nor a well-known novelist, he had never received an anonymous letter. He had at first a reaction of distaste and was on the point of tearing up the message. Then he thought over the phrases and realized how cleverly they had been chosen to arouse his

uneasiness. If he had not been convinced of Claire's complete honesty, he would have been seriously worried.

So much duplicity on the part of this young girl seemed to him inconceivable. Yet he had known women well thought of in society, models of good conduct in appearance, who in his arms had displayed rich unsuspected aptitudes. He knew by experience that hypocrisy is one of the rules of provincial life and that a frustrated woman who has once broken the dykes can go beyond the limits of hysteria.

He was ashamed of the secret desire which compelled him to verify the accusations of this "friend." Naturally, he did not wish to confront Claire with this letter. Thinking it over, he realized that, sometimes, after the tutorial hour with Françoise, she had gone walking alone in the park. He had never attached the least importance to this. He decided to take the first occasion to broach the subject.

Such an occasion presented itself the following day. Claire went out of the château in the direction of the park. She walked without haste toward the pavilion. He followed her at a distance, discreetly. He was considerably surprised to see her enter. He hid behind the trees. A lamp shone in the second storey. Why had Claire hidden herself in this hunting lodge? What did she do in this isolated, meagrely furnished house, where nothing could attract her?

He waited a few minutes. He made a detour and slipped along the wall the grill of which permitted him to see the surrounding countryside. He went out the little worm-eaten door, the key to which he carried, and along the boundary of the park. He went up and down for a quarter of an hour and saw no one. But always the lamp shone.

His perplexity increased with every minute. It was

unbelievable that Claire should isolate herself thus. What permissible reason would she have to leave the château to remain so long in the park?

A half-hour passed. No one came to meet her. Yet still she stayed. Stephen took the bit between the teeth. He couldn't stand this doubt. He entered the park, passed the door, and, his heart in a vice, climbed the stairway the steps of which creaked beneath his shoes.

He paused on the second-storey landing and knocked.

A calm voice answered, "Come in."

He hovered on the threshold. With an air of detachment, he observed: "Well, why do you play Robinson Crusoe in this lost corner of the park?"

Without the least embarrassment Claire came towards him, hands outstretched. "It was sweet of you to give me a surprise. I sometimes come here not to be disturbed, but you are always welcome."

Stephen was taken aback. He did not know what to think. Was this effrontery? Cynicism? "Why don't you wish to be disturbed?"

"For a very good reason, my darling. I work."

Claire pointed to a large table covered with books and manuscripts. He leaned over to examine them. A few notes arrested his attention. He looked at Claire. "What does this mean?"

"I have never given up the idea of obtaining a degree in fine arts. I have already told you. I have it in my head to win a diploma. Look, here are my courses; works on semantics, history, philosophy. I study these writers, make notes; it is a demanding task, you know. At the château I am often distracted by little Françoise, so I have found this retreat to which I can escape when I have need. You don't mind?"

Stephen breathed a long sigh. This discovery put him entirely at ease. In his joy, he strained Claire to his breast and cried: "Splendid, sweetheart! I am proud of you. Later I will put a marble plaque on the door of this pavilion: *Here Baronne de Montenoy flirted with the great thinkers of History*. I noticed this light while going by. I wished to investigate. But now I leave you to the great thinkers. When you hear the gong you will come to dine and pass on to me a little of the wisdom your philosophers have bestowed on you."

Stephen walked towards the château with a light step. He reflected. His joy at having exposed the frivolity of the accusations against Claire was tempered by the determination to pierce to the bottom of this affair.

Scarcely had he re-entered the château than he summoned Angela to his office. He was determined to give her notice at once. When she stood before him he burst out without preliminaries. "Angela, it is time for us to separate. You will leave today."

Angela turned pale. She had expected everything but this brutal send-off. "Monsieur, you throw me out!" she cried.

"You are intelligent enough to guess why!"

"I have not the least idea."

Stephen was on the point of putting the anonymous letter under her nose. Then he guessed she would protest her innocence. Suspicions, even well founded, are not proofs. He withheld it and continued:

"Now if you do not understand you are more stupid than I thought. Don't argue. I shall not require your services for the future as I intend to close the château for an indefinite time. I will pay you a year's wages, although you hardly deserve it. Let us leave it at that."

The lips of Angela trembled. She was on the point of bursting into reproaches and recriminations. She controlled herself. "If I have ceased to please, there is nothing more to say."

She might have added: that bitch has insisted on my going. However, she lowered her voice to say in a sad voice. "I will do whatever Monsieur wishes. I only want to point out that the family of Monsieur is expected the day after tomorrow. My presence might perhaps be useful to ensure a usual standard of service during the eight days the guests will be here. That will permit me also to make my own arrangements. If Monsieur has no objection, I will go soon after . . . the same day."

Stephen was on the point of insisting on an immediate departure. Then he reflected that his house would be disorganized without Angela. It would take time to find and train a replacement. He nodded briefly. "Very well, another week then."

Angela left. Stephen sighed with relief. In a few days he would be rid of his embarrassment.

X

CHARLES and Cecile were taking it easy in their shiny American limousine driven by a liveried chauffeur. When they had reached the village of Plessis-St. Jean, Charles said: "We haven't had much information about your brother in the past six months. The only certain thing is that Angela is still there."

"Alas, yes."

"You see. I told you. When a man of his age falls for a woman, no matter what kind she is, even the worst type of gold-digger, he loses all sense of proportion."

"I cannot understand it."

To be better informed, he had notified Thierry and Henrietta that he would come to pick them up on his way to the château. The Chrysler stopped before the last house in the village of Plessis. It was a white house, placed at the bottom of a vegetable garden. The offspring of the Count of Villesec who ranged between five and sixteen came rushing out to meet them. Thierry, always on time, was ready with his bags. After polite greetings, Henrietta and her husband climbed into the car. They had a few minutes to chat.

Cecile asked her sister. "Now, Henrietta, anything new at the château?"

"Nothing much so far as we know. You know Stephen doesn't confide in us. We have hardly seen him three times since the New Year. All I can say is that Angela is still

there. But, just think of that after the gossip going around that Stephen has fallen for Mademoiselle."

Charles burst into laughter. "Wait a minute. That's too much. It's not a château, but a harem!"

"Charles, really——" protested Cecile.

Thierry, always precise, added a significant detail. "Mademoiselle eats with her employer."

Charles exclaimed: "From the napkin to the sheets, there's only one false step. Oh, well, I'm not too unhappy about this set-up."

Cecile turned to her sister. "But if Stephen is getting mixed up with his governess that will lead to trouble with Angela."

"I don't know anything about it, but it is possible."

Thierry addressed his brother-in-law. "In any case, I believe that the gossips have some truth. My wife and I have the impression that there is no longer any question of a marriage between Stephen and his housekeeper. It has already gone that far."

Charles nudged the Count. "You must be relieved, old boy. The day Stephen led the Flemish girl to the altar would be the end of your hopes."

"What hopes?"

"Oh, don't pretend. The inheritance would be snatched from under your nose. My boy, you'd be out in the cold."

"Oh, we have never had such expectations."

"That's what you say! Don't worry. I understand. When you have a millionaire relative, you have a right to hope for something—in case of accident. But if the danger of a marriage with Angela is over you can rest easy once more. Stephen in spite of everything will not forget Henrietta. His own flesh and blood."

Henrietta seemed very disturbed by this conversation.

"We have information about this governess," she interrupted. "It seems she is well-born. Her mother was Madame Grandjean, widow of the Count de la Roche, and born de Cizonne. She was related to the dukes of Saint-Gilles and to the Princes of Morello and the House of Savoy."

Charles whistled with admiration. "Sweetheart! She is no little pick-up, this governess. I got a peep at her in September. Pretty as a picture. She has what it takes to distract an old bear who gets bored after dinner."

Cecile sighed. "Well, we shall see what we shall see."

Dinner was served in the large dining-room. Nothing seemed to have changed. Stephen presided as always. Cecile was on his right and Henrietta on his left. The only innovation which struck the two sisters was the presence of Mademoiselle, who occupied a place facing the host. Angela looked after the service unobtrusively, as usual.

Charles, seated at the right of Claire, was not annoyed. He enjoyed her conversation. She was interested in every subject and said the right thing at the right time. When they went into the drawing-room, Stephen, Charles and Mademoiselle had a lively discussion on local politics. Cecile, Henrietta and Thierry, a little to one side, commented on the situation in a low voice.

"What were you saying, Cecile," asked Thierry.

"She plays the mistress of the house," Cecile answered. "That is my impression."

"Isn't it so?"

"She acts like one of the family."

"You noticed how nicely Stephen treats her?"

"Yes, that struck me."

"I have never seen him so gracious with a woman."

The customary bridge put an end to their whispers. Claire retired discreetly. Charles, who had eaten and drunk well, decided to take a walk in the park by moonlight. At eleven, Stephen took leave of his guests. Thierry, Henrietta and Cecile still remained in the library, waiting the return of Charles. They had more to talk over.

Charles appeared at last. He seemed impatient to tell them something. He steered them into a corner and said in a low voice. "Well, children, I would have sworn that Stephen had a new favourite in his harem. I have just made sure of it."

"What do you mean?"

"Coming in from the park, I went up to my room to fetch a packet of cigarettes. As I came out, I saw at the end of the corridor our lovely governess saying good night to our host. Keep your seats. They were glued together like Romeo and Juliet. Their kiss never stopped. Finally I hid myself in the shadow and waited. Mademoiselle entered her room and Stephen went into his. But what a display, my friends!"

Thierry seemed the most impressed by this story. He was really disturbed. "Claire has replaced Angela?"

Charles joked. "There's your evidence. Let's see, old boy, everything is tied fast. The governess has her hooks in first. Your old rake of a Stephen is taken by this appetizing young thing who does not run after him. He has her sit at his table. The ice is broken. It is broken now to such an extent that he exhibits her to us in the role of a future mistress of the house and, when bedtime comes, he can't stop kissing her good night."

These deductions were irrefutably logical. Henrietta looked at her husband who seemed very upset. A new threat menaced the Villesecs. The Count was unable to prevent himself from putting his thoughts into words.

"But then if Stephen is so much taken by this girl we can expect the worst."

Cecile tried to reassure her brother-in-law. "Oh, just one more for the collection."

But Charles wanted to tease the Count. "I do not think so. As Henrietta truly said, Mademoiselle is well-born. She is not a farm girl whom one rolls in the hay. Do you want to bet on it? I am sure that this young girl who is far from being a fool has given this pleasant little ultimatum to our dear baron: nothing doing without a ring on my finger. The way to the bedchamber passes by the altar."

Cecile made a gesture of denial. "Oh, surely, Charles, you don't think that. A bachelor like Stephen who has resisted a hundred temptations."

"It is the hundred and first which counts, my dear. Bachelors are like ripe pears. They fall of themselves into the apron of the beautiful wench who knows how to shake the pear-tree."

Every word of Charles seemed to pierce Thierry's heart. When they separated to go to their respective rooms. Thierry shook the hand of his brother-in-law in a hopeless way.

Charles, the good fellow, tapped him on the shoulder. "Cheer up, old man. You look as if you had lost your last friend. Wait until you receive an engraved card for the ceremony before you give up everything."

Thierry and Henrietta undressed in silence. They exchanged furtive looks like two beasts in the wood. They

did not dare to express their thoughts. They wondered if they had not rejoiced too soon and if Stephen was not going from the frying-pan into the fire.

At last Thierry stood no more. He made his short prayer before the silver crucifix on the wall and this duty done turned towards his wife with a decided air, as if to say: "And now to serious business."

"Henrietta, I think that the language of Charles, coarse as it was, should open your eyes. Disaster is about to break."

"I do not believe it. Oh, no! This would be . . . This would be . . ."

"My dear, we must face the danger. If Charles has surprised this passionate kiss between Stephen and this woman, we would be imbeciles to pretend to ourselves any more."

"Cecile thought it was only another adventure."

"She wanted to console you. This governess has taken possession of the place. It is clear as day. Tomorrow she will be installed as mistress of Plessis-St. Jean. Stephen's fortune will go to her."

Henrietta began to cry, the words of Thierry flooded her.

"It is not the time to weep into your pillow," he observed. "When a danger threatens, you must fight it. Tomorrow, I shall make enquiries."

"You enquire . . . How?"

Thierry pulled the covers over his great nose and murmured, "I know."

The next day at eleven-thirty, Thierry discreetly left the château. He borrowed Jerome's bicycle on the pretext of taking some exercise before lunch. Pedalling vigorously towards the town, he arrived about noon before the office of old Grippet, the lawyer. After a few minutes, Michot, the Grippet clerk, came out.

He pretended surprise. "Well, well, Marcel! I passed your office by chance. Have you five minutes to spare for a little drink?"

Michot agreed. They went to a little out-of-the-way café. After the usual talk about the weather and the crops, the Count leaned towards Michot and began: "Now then, Marcel, Our dear Stephen has taken a governess into his service, a Mademoiselle Grandjean."

"I know."

"Oh, you do? Good. Then you can understand the family curiosity. We have all wondered about her. Some think Stephen has marriage in view. Others are convinced Mademoiselle will become one more girl in the collection of the baron."

"You are not going to ask me how to pick a winner in this nuptial race?" Michot chuckled.

"You can probably give me a little tip. If Stephen has really serious intentions towards Mademoiselle, he will have had a word with old Grippelet."

The clerk lowered his tone. "Thierry, you've got a keen nose for events. Only last Monday your brother-in-law came to see Grippelet. I was there and can vouch he had new plans at Plessis-St. Jean."

"What do you mean by new plans?"

"The baron told us that he wanted to marry this young girl as soon as possible. He asked us what papers were necessary. Then after the details of the marriage the baron raised the question of his will."

"Ah!" Thierry leaned forward, anxious not to lose a word.

"He had it confirmed by old Grippelet that the whole testament can be annulled by another of more recent date. When asked if he intended to change his last dispositions, the baron cried: 'That goes without saying!'"

Thierry turned pale. He drained his glass: "You have the impression that Stephen is thinking of a complete change in his will?" he said in a voice choked with emotion.

"No question about it. Suppose you were a bachelor and you married. Would you leave your money to a flock of more or less distant relatives? In love with your wife, you would want to see that she was looked after in case anything happened to you."

"Naturally."

"It was inevitable. Your brother-in-law will be like all our other clients in this respect."

"Naturally."

Thierry spoke with lowered eyes and drawn face. Seven millions were slipping away before his eyes. He clutched at a last despairing hope. "He has not yet changed his will?"

"No, but it is only a question of days. He seems very anxious to hurry the marriage and, take my word on it, once there is a Madame de Montenoy at the château, the first testament will be only good to light the fire."

Thierry paid for the drinks. It was twelve-thirty. He had just time to get back to the château. His knees shaking with emotion, he mounted the bicycle and started off. He rolled along beneath the shade of the poplars as in a nightmare. This final blow had crushed him. The certain loss of even the little that he had counted on made him intensely bitter.

Thierry arrived, breathless, at ten minutes past one. He was late for lunch. Stephen required that one arrive punctually on the hour, with the second stroke of the gong. Thierry sponged the sweat from his brow and rushed to take his usual place, muttering excuses.

Stephen gave him a disapproving stare. "You've been chasing butterflies, my friend?"

Thierry pretended that he had to go home to get his razor.

Charles leaned towards Henrietta. "You'd better look-out. The Count has found some village queen. They've been picking daisies on the banks of the Loire; 'I love you, I love you not.'"

Thierry turned red. He hated this kind of talk. "You aren't funny, Charles."

Charles raised his glass of Vouvray and said pleasantly, "Old fellow, when I make a point, you know it, I hunt with a forty-four."

XI

ON Saturday, the day before Easter, Stephen was particularly in form. His gaiety astonished his guests. He took them all for lunch with Claire of course, to an old inn of the neighbourhood where the trout and the wine were renowned. It was a great success. He had it on the tip of his tongue to announce his approaching marriage. But he refrained regretfully. In agreement with Claire, they had decided to keep their engagement quiet. What was the use of receiving the forced congratulations of people who would be stunned by the news?

They returned in the afternoon. While Stephen, Charles and Thierry relaxed in the library, Cecile, with Henrietta, cornered Claire in the drawing-room.

"Mademoiselle, I don't know whether you are a good governess but I congratulate you on the cheerful atmosphere you have created in this house."

"Oh, Madame, I haven't done anything."

"Such modesty! But facts are facts. Stephen has never been so full of life."

Claire was on her guard. She felt the black beady eyes of the two sisters on her.

"I believe, my dear, you are the daughter of the Countess de la Roche," Cecile continued.

"Yes, madame."

"A charming woman. I have friends who knew her. Between us, you are worth a better fate."

Henrietta put in with a sly wink. "The wise woman gives fate a helping hand. Isn't that so?"

"I don't know what you mean, Madame. I trust in my luck."

The reserve of Claire was not encouraging. She was evidently playing a lone hand. Cecile returned to the charge. "I have the impression that our dear brother has a weakness of the heart for you, Mademoiselle!" The elegant enamel of the old face cracked into a frosty smile.

Claire was ready for her. "The baron has taken an interest in my work with his godchild. He has honoured me with his friendship."

"That's plain to see. He has eyes only for you."

"He is so much alone here."

"He would not wish additional company," Henrietta threw in. The old cats had a velvet purr, sheathing and unsheathing their claws.

Claire glanced at her quickly. "That is not for me to say."

Cecile made a last try. "Just between us, what do you think of him?"

"Frankly, Madame, the baron is the kind of man who requires much knowing. For two months I hardly saw him. Then, things changed. We began to have interesting talks. He told me he felt lonely here. I have tried to understand him."

The sisters exchanged a glance. Cecile nodded. "I'm sure you do, my dear."

Claire rose. "Excuse me. Stephen is looking for his cigars."

They looked after her. Henrietta sniffed. "She'll get along, that one."

"She's playing a deep game."

"Charles was right. Something has happened here that I didn't realize. Stephen is a changed man."

"We've got to know what's going on." Cecile gave her sister a pensive stare. "You must sound him out."

"I'd like to see you try it." Henrietta frowned. She had a curious air of withered delicacy, like a lean and fading virgin. "As well question a deaf man. I am sure that he will one of these days present us with an accomplished fact."

Cecile sighed. "My dear, this is not funny for us."

Henrietta said solemnly: "Thierry can't sleep."

They were interrupted by Charles who stuck his head in the door. "Stephen has a raging headache. We won't have the card game tonight."

They looked up, startled and conspiratorial, like two ageing pussies on a back fence.

The climax came at twelve-thirty.

Charles and Cecile, Thierry and Henrietta had gone to their various rooms. The château was silent. Suddenly, Charles heard rapid steps in the corridor and someone knocked vigorously on the door. He asked, "Who is there?"

The voice of Claire answered, "Monsieur! Monsieur! The baron has lost consciousness in the library. Come quickly."

Charles put on a dressing-gown and opened the door to Claire, pale and upset. While they went down the stairway, Charles learned that Stephen remained in the library to talk with Claire. Suddenly, he had put a hand to his heart and made violent efforts to breathe. Then he had collapsed in his chair. Claire, unable to rouse him, had run to warn Charles.

They entered the library and found Stephen in the large armchair. He was still unconscious. Charles, whose

medical knowledge was very slight, cried: "An attack of apoplexy, or something of that sort. We must find a doctor at once. Who usually looks after him?"

"The baron has never been ill since I have been here. I believe there is a doctor at Plessis-St. Jean, Dr. Dellecroix. I'll telephone him at once."

Cecile had come down with Henrietta and Thierry. She stared fixedly at the unconscious form of Stephen. Charles, man of action, took command.

"The best idea is to take the car and go at once to Plessis. We can do nothing for Stephen. I will bring back Dr. Dellecroix."

He went out quickly. Cecile, Henrietta, Thierry and Claire gathered round the sick man. They were in a state of helplessness and confusion.

"We must rouse him."

"Salts, perhaps?"

"An ice-pack on his forehead?"

"See if his knees will respond."

Claire returned with the ammonia which had no effect. Anguish was mixed with helplessness. Thierry, white-faced, stared at this man who had two hundred and fifty millions and whose death might occur at any time. He hoped that the doctor would be out and Charles would have to go to Tours to find help. The longer Stephen was left in this state, the less chance there would be of saving him.

And the baron's death would mean at least a chance for the Villesecs. Stephen would have no chance to change his will. The present testament would remain in force.

Henrietta, who had broken into tears, began to pray. Thierry joined his prayers to hers. But secretly he hoped that God would not listen.

Cecile turned suddenly to Claire. "Where is Angela?"

"We have not seen her this evening."

"Had Stephen told her that he intended to let her go?"

"Yes, Madame. He told me last night that he had given her notice, but kept her on for a few days during your visit."

"He ought to have sent her off without delay."

"I tried to tell him so and he answered: 'Oh, what difference does a few days make?'"

The wheels of a car crunched in the driveway. Charles entered with Dr. Dellecroix. The doctor was a man of fifty, short and stout, with grey hair. He barely knew Stephen, having come to Plessis since the Liberation.

After examining the patient, he straightened and said: "An attack of angina. Very serious. Has he suffered from this before?"

Cecile answered. "He had pneumonia several years ago and went to a hospital in Tours. The doctor warned him then that his heart might be affected. But he would never take care of himself."

The doctor nodded. He prepared a hypodermic injection which he administered in the baron's arm. He turned to the others. "We must get him to bed at once."

Stephen, under the influence of the injection, passed a quiet night, in the care of the two sisters who insisted on monopolizing the sick-room and would not let Claire approach. The doctor left a prescription to be collected in Tours the first thing in the morning. Before setting out, Charles had a conversation with Cecile on the subject of Angela. They found the housekeeper in her room on the second floor.

Cecile opened the attack without preliminaries. "Under the circumstances, Angela, we would prefer that you left

at once. Get your bags ready. Our chauffeur will drive you into Tours."

This ultimatum floored Angela. She turned pale and could barely speak. "To go at once? But the baron must still need me. I think that——"

Cecile cut her short. "The baron is very ill and unable to give orders. It is I who am telling you what to do. Your presence here is no longer necessary. The baron will send your money after you."

Angela gave her a bitter look. "I have not deserved this. I have tried to do my job faithfully for three years. It is very unfair."

"Angela, I do not wish to argue with you," cried Cecile impatiently. "It would be wise for you not to pursue the subject. You will leave this afternoon."

"This afternoon!" The housekeeper refused to be browbeaten. "But I can't. Madame must give me at least twenty-four hours. I must have time to make my arrangements."

"No, at once," Cecile snapped.

Angela dropped her defiance. She spoke in a low imploring tone. "Madame, I beg you. Think of my position. I don't know where to go. You can't put me into the street. Let me at least have time to telephone. I have a distant cousin in Lille who may be able to put me up with a few hours' notice."

Charles intervened with his customary good nature. He gave the impression of wanting to make everyone happy. "Angela, we have no reason to make you any special favours. But since you are in a spot we will give a chance to find a place to stay. We don't need to argue over twenty-four hours. Isn't that right, Cecile?"

Cecile seemed surprised by this intervention. She

hesitated, then said: "All right. Get ready to go to-morrow morning. You will be taken to Tours at nine. That is all I have to say to you."

"Very well, Madame."

They left the room. At the end of the corridor, Cecile turned towards her husband. "Why did you have to interfere? You know we ought to get rid of her at once."

"My dear, you are right, but it is not necessary to be so harsh. The result will be the same in twenty-four hours."

Charles went on down the stairway. In the main hall he found Thierry, waiting to accompany him to Tours.

They drove rapidly, reaching the city in a short time. At the chemist's, they waited while the prescription was filled. Included in the prescription was a tube of digitalis with a direction of ten drops every evening.

On a return journey, Charles and Thierry talked over the situation. "Poor Stephen. Who would have thought his heart would give way like that?"

Thierry had a preoccupied and sombre look. He murmured: "A life of sin carries its own reward."

Charles shrugged. "God has other fish to fry besides worrying about the little weaknesses of our brother-in-law."

"Be careful, Charles. You're talking like Stephen."

After some moments of silence Charles astonished at the stricken countenance of his companion, leaned over and tapped him on the shoulder. "You look worried, old man. Are you afraid our friend will recover?"

Thierry looked up quickly. "How can you say such a thing, Charles?"

"You know why, my friend. If he lives to marry this girl, all the old boy's property will go to her."

"It is impossible for me to think of such sordid material

considerations in the actual circumstances," said Thierry in a hollow voice. "I am praying for our brother's recovery."

Charles nodded, sceptically. "Yes, yes. Naturally a long face is put on for the world. But inside you think differently. My dear Thierry, we have lost too many illusions."

The car approached the village of Plessis. "Would you mind stopping at my house a moment," Thierry asked. "I would like to pick up some extra shirts."

Charles directed the chauffeur to the little white house. He and Thierry got out and were immediately deluged by a wave of children who clamoured for news of the château.

"Wait for me," Thierry said. "I won't be a minute." He went on up to the second floor, surrounded by excited children.

Charles stood alone in the downstairs dining-room. He wandered along a corridor into the drawing-room. Overhead he could hear the patter of little feet.

Thierry reappeared at last with a little overnight bag. "I'm taking a warm sweater for Henrietta. If she has to sit up all night with Stephen she will be cold."

"And your children, what about them?"

"My oldest girl will look after them."

They entered the car. Thierry lapsed into a gloomy silence, broken only by a flicker of interest when they passed a hearse on the road.

When Stephen woke up, the first thing he saw were the long sad faces of his sisters hovering over him. Cecile put a damp nervous hand on his forehead.

"Dear Stephen, you have frightened us all with this attack. But, thank God, the doctor has reassured us. It is nothing serious. We are going to look after you. Now keep absolutely quiet."

The prospect of being entombed for hours in the company of his sisters did not attract Stephen. They had always bored him, even as children. He said abruptly: "Where is Claire?"

"In her room. Henrietta told her that we were going to stay with you."

Stephen clutched the sheet and replied heavily, "I don't want that. Ask her to come in."

"But Stephen——" began Henrietta.

She was going to insist, but Cecile shook her head. They went out and in a moment steps were heard lightly in the corridor. Claire burst into the room.

"Stephen, darling!"

"Ah, my sweet. Come here and stay with me. I need you." He looked at his sisters. "You can go now."

They looked at him indignantly. "We shall be in the drawing-room," Cecile announced icily. "You will call us, Mademoiselle, if there is any change."

The two sisters swept out of the room.

Stephen settled back comfortably on his pillows. "I want only you near me," he said to the young girl.

She hugged him, whispering, "I was so frightened, so frightened for you, my love."

He patted her shoulder. "You haven't got rid of me yet. I'm too tough to kill like that."

"You mustn't tire yourself. Don't speak too much."

Stephen sighed. "What did the doctor say?"

"The pneumonia left your heart weak. You should have taken care of yourself."

MAURICE DEKOBRA

He smiled, a flash of the old wolf. "I've never taken care of myself. I'll die with my boots on." Suddenly he sat up, stared at the door. A gentle creaking came from the corridor.

"Try the door," he whispered to Claire.

She tiptoed to the door, jerked it open. The corridor yawned black and empty.

He leaned back. "I thought they were listening," he said. Then turning, he reached out a hand. "Bring me pen and paper, Claire. I have a job to do."

The two couples were waiting in the drawing-room for the doctor to come downstairs. It was early afternoon. Henrietta and Cecile still smarted under Stephen's treatment of them.

"It's unbelievable," Cecile kept repeating. "To drive us out like that. His own flesh and blood. To prefer that little intriguer who holds him fast in her claws. It's revolting!"

Charles tried to put ashes on the fire. "Come, come, Cecile. Don't get stirred up. You have done your duty. It is not your fault if Stephen wants the Queen of his harem."

"The family should take precedence."

"You can still be useful by keeping an eye on the housekeeper," said Thierry. "I think she's capable of anything under the circumstances."

Cecile, exasperated, cried: "I wanted to put her out at once. But Charles let her stay with a mistaken idea of kindness. She makes fun of us, the strumpet."

Charles made an evasive gesture. "Oh, it's hardly

possible that Angela is lying in wait with a machine-gun. Claire keeps watch. Stephen takes no food. After all, Angela won't make him die from a distance by chanting spells through the keyhole."

The doctor came at last. They rose hurriedly for his report.

"The baron is very weak. His pulse is low. His temperature is below normal. He must keep absolutely quiet. With the medicine that I have prescribed, there is a good chance of recovery. But he must be careful."

Cecile asked, "What do you think of his nurse?"

"She seems completely devoted and understands the situation very well. My patient has confided to me some matters which make clear his reasons for wanting her."

"What did he say, doctor?" Henrietta cried.

The doctor smiled and shook his head. "He will tell you if he wishes. I have given my instructions to Mademoiselle Grandjean. I will return tomorrow morning at nine to see how he is."

The doctor took his leave.

The relatives remained for hours in weary suspense. They had dinner in a vast and forbidding silence. Afterwards, Thierry and Charles tried a few hands of cribbage, while the sisters patrolled the corridor keeping watch for Angela.

At eleven, the cribbage-players were disturbed by a commotion on the second floor. They went up and found the two sisters hovering about the housekeeper like two hawks.

"What's up?" Charles asked.

Angela replied in a plaintive voice. "Monsieur, I am followed everywhere by these women. I can't get my things without one of them watching around the corner."

Cecile had an angry suspicious look. "I saw her in the corridor with something in her hand. She was near Stephen's bathroom. When she saw me, she rushed to her own room." She turned to the housekeeper. "What do you have there?"

"A travelling case," Angela said sulkily. "The baron gave it to me." She showed them a small handsome case in green morocco leather with gold clasps.

Cecile stared at it. "You are sure it is yours?"

Angela changed colour. "If the baron were not so ill, he would tell you. It was a present last New Year's Day."

"Considering your relations it is possible," Cecile said spitefully. "You may take it."

The housekeeper held her small case tightly. She trembled with rage and shame. "I have not deserved this. For three years——" she choked, looking bitterly at them. "For three years I was his devoted slave. He never had reason to reproach me. You have no right, no right . . ." Her indignation threatened to dissolve into a fit of weeping. She turned quickly and went into her room.

Thierry shook his head. "I don't like her attitude. She is playing the injured innocent."

"She has a deep game," Henrietta added.

Charles nodded. "She is acting a little queer. Still packing at eleven o'clock. How does a housekeeper need so much time to get ready?"

Thierry observed with an air of pious reproach. "If it weren't for you, this godless creature wouldn't be here any more."

"I felt sorry for her. As a Christian, my friend, you should understand that."

The Count of Villesec sniffled. "You are too indulgent towards sin."

They descended to the drawing-room, Henrietta lingering behind to peek into the sick-room. In a few minutes she came flying back. "He is much better. I have seen him and he said, 'Tell the family I'm not ready for a hearse this time.'"

Charles exclaimed. "Splendid! Our brave Stephen has beaten death. He is in the hands of his beloved, he will pull through. You will see, this will be a false alarm."

Henrietta murmured peevishly. "We are still kept away from him. The governess arranges everything."

At two in the morning, Charles and Thierry had finished their seventh game of cribbage. Charles lit a cigar. Thierry sighed. "This night will never end. I'm going out to get some fresh air."

"All right, go hunt some fireflies."

Thierry went out on the terrace. Charles stretched out in an armchair. Some moments passed in complete silence. Suddenly Thierry returned.

"Come with me," he said in a quick nervous voice.

Charles looked up. "What is it?"

"Come here."

They went outside. Thierry pointed solemnly up at the third floor where a single room blazed with light.

"It's her room," he whispered. "That woman. She is still up."

"Packing, no doubt," said Charles.

The Count of Villesec looked around furtively. He seemed unable to stand still, prowling beneath Angela's window like a hound on a scent. "Two o'clock," he kept saying. "That sinful woman. She will do anything."

Charles looked at him with a troubled air. "Do you really think——" He broke off, with a brief laugh. "His favourite is on guard. Nothing to worry about. Come on, old fellow, let's play another hand."

Hardly had they sat down at the green baize table than a cry resounded through the silent château and down the stairway came frantic footsteps. It was Claire, all pale and shaking.

"Come quickly. He has lost consciousness again. I can't rouse him."

They mounted the stairs, two at a time and found on the landing Cecile and Henrietta clinging together in their nightgowns. Hurriedly, Claire broke out with her story. Towards midnight, as the doctor ordered, she had given the baron ten drops of digitalis. Twenty minutes later, after the sick man's respiration had become more and more short and heavy, he no longer breathed.

Charles went for the doctor. After what seemed hours, while the family grouped, choked and fearful, around the bed of the prostrate baron, Dr. Dellecroix appeared. He leaned over the patient, took his pulse and listened to his heart. He shook his head and continued the examination.

After some further moments of anguished waiting, they heard the inexorable words. "Monsieur de Montenoy is dead."

Claire burst into a paroxysm of weeping.

XII

THE shock produced varying reactions. Henrietta threw herself hysterically into the arms of Cecile. Thierry fell on his knees. Charles remained calm. Claire, fighting to keep control, stood near the doctor. He asked her: "Mademoiselle, at what time did you give the drops of digitalis that I prescribed."

"A little before midnight, when he woke up."

"Where is the flask?"

The doctor examined the contents with his torch. Then he looked at the body once more. He observed: "This death coming after the improvement this morning seems very strange. I might even say it looks extremely suspect. I cannot at present sign a death certificate."

The doctor's words created further shock. Charles was the only one who dared to break the silence. "What exactly do you mean, doctor?"

"I keep my conclusions to myself. This is a case for further investigation."

Thierry rose hastily to his feet. The two sisters gave horrified exclamations. Claire protested: "But doctor no one else has gone near the baron since your last visit. I have done everything exactly as you ordered."

"Mademoiselle, I do not doubt you. It is no less true that the body of my patient presents some signs which make me doubt a natural death. It is necessary to clear up the matter. And I must tell you that the appearance

of the tube of digitalis has something queer about it."

"What are you going to do," the girl asked.

"First, I want to make a call." The doctor walked to the small cabinet and picked up the telephone. "Hello, Tours? Put me through to the police."

Claire had gone out with the members of the family. While the others descended to the drawing-room, unable to sleep, she went to her room. At the end of her resistance, her nerves at the breaking-point, she had a violent crying fit. This disaster had destroyed all her plans. The brief agony of the man that she was going to marry had terribly affected her. In despair, she still heard the doctor's voice speaking of an autopsy to the police. If the death of Stephen was suspicious, if it was proved that he had been poisoned they might accuse her. For her grief, fear was added, little by little, a horrible fear that they might try to make her responsible. The proof of love that Stephen had given her while driving the family from the room would be turned against her. The fact that she remained alone with the sick man would give rise to every suspicion.

Wiping her tears, she remained huddled on her bed, paralysed with anguish. Suddenly she sat bolt upright; cold drops of sweat stood on her forehead. Stephen had drawn a will in her favour. This generous act that she had never asked for might become damning evidence against her. Stephen had made her place the paper in the drawer of the night-table. She must destroy it before the police got their hands on it.

She rose and shaking with nerves went softly along the corridor to the dead man's room. She knocked once, twice.

"Come in," a voice said.

She entered and saw the doctor sitting in a great chair

beside the bed. By the gloom of a single night-lamp the doctor's face appeared, sunken and waiting, above the frozen body on the bed. His voice came like the hollow echo of a deep bell. "What do you wish, Mademoiselle?"

"I wanted to know if there was anything . . ." and her voice faltered to a whisper . . . "Anything I could do?"

"Ah, Mademoiselle, the dead in their world have no need of your services."

Still she stood there while the great loneliness of night and death ticked away. She heard her own voice, breaking across the shadows like a strange remembered cry. "I did everything you told me. I know your prescriptions by heart. I put the medicine in the little white cabinet of the bathroom. Would you like to see it?"

The doctor gave her a ghostly smile. "Mademoiselle, I have informed the police that nothing would be touched."

"Are those who were about the baron considered suspect?"

"If the result of the autopsy confirms my suspicions, it is exactly what will happen."

She trembled, looked away. "God knows what anyone could accuse me of!"

"Were you not the nurse of this man?"

"But I——" how could she make him understand the hatreds which probably prowled the château? "I did not wish it. I would have preferred that his sisters look after him. But he, he wanted me alone."

The doctor said nothing.

Claire was standing before the doctor, huddled dimly in his chair. Behind her, barely three feet away was the night-table. She had only to move a step to recover the will.

But the doctor never turned his glance from her. He

believed that the girl had a compelling reason for this sudden dramatic appearance in the middle of the night. He knew little of the life of the château except the rumour that Stephen had broken with his housekeeper in order to carry on an affair with the governess. The doctor distrusted village gossip and knew that talk of this sort is like one of those trick mirrors in which appearances are distorted and reality becomes a caricature.

Yet in this case, he believed that Claire was the mistress of the baron. This afforded the only plausible explanation of the patient's wish to be looked after by her alone. But as the death of Stephen was either the result of a premeditated crime or at the least of a gross carelessness, he wondered who in this house had an interest that the baron should die. As a country doctor, he had seen other deaths in suspicious circumstances. He knew too much about peasant avarice and bourgeois greed to have many illusions.

Rising slowly from his chair, he said to the girl. "Mademoiselle, this sudden death may cause difficulties for you. You were the only witness of the last moments of the baron."

Claire trembled as if she stood before the black cap of justice. Frantically she tried to think of a way to reach the paper. She put her hands to her face, shuddered, and fell to the floor. The doctor took her in his arms and made her sit in the armchair. After some moments during which she hovered in a state of unbearable suspense, she realized that her effort had failed. The doctor remained quietly at her side, apparently little moved by the pretended fainting spell.

Suddenly there was a knocking at the door.

"Come in!" the doctor said.

Cecile and Henrietta appeared. They carried a palm branch and a crucifix. Cecile said in a low voice: "Doctor, Henrietta and I have come to watch over our poor brother. We would never forgive ourselves if we neglected this duty. We wish to pray for the repose of his soul."

The doctor bowed. "I understand, Madame." He hesitated, and added. "I must remain until the arrival of the authorities. If you wish to stand at the foot of the bed, I will watch with you."

"As you wish, doctor." The two sisters took their place about the great bed where the man, now lying dead, had passed so many pleasant moments.

The doctor touched Claire's shoulder and whispered: "Come, Mademoiselle. Get up. You feel better. After this attack I think you ought to go to your room and lie down."

Claire rose painfully. She knew there was no hope of recovering the will. She went out into the darkness of the corridor. Her room was at the farther end. She moved slowly. Seeing nothing about her, as if she were walking in a dream. After moments of anguished groping, her fingertips touched the panels of her door. With almost hysterical relief she entered and turned the light switch to illuminate this country of the dead in which she had been wandering.

A man was sitting in her armchair.

With the drama about her, Claire had almost forgotten the existence of Raymond. She remained frozen on the threshold, without asking at first how he came to be there. He motioned to her.

"Close the door. No one knows I'm here."

"But how did you get in?"

"I know where your room is and I got in from the

terrace. It wasn't hard to climb to the second floor. I gave you twenty-four hours to think it over. It's time to settle our business. Is it true that your old boy is under the weather?"

Claire replied, "He is dead."

Raymond jumped. He had expected everything but this. He repeated: "Dead? Since when?"

"This very night. He had a heart attack last night. He died suddenly. The doctor is still in the room. Stephen's two sisters are there."

This unexpected end threw Raymond's plans into confusion. His disappointment could be read on his face. For the first time his assurance and his spirit of decision seemed shaken. He demanded explanations. Claire gave him the facts and added that the authorities had been called in by the doctor on the case. Raymond blinked at that. She added: "I hope you understand and don't wish to make the acquaintance of these gentlemen."

Raymond played with the keys in his pocket. He objected: "Just a moment. When did the doctor telephone?"

"About twelve-thirty?"

"Good. In any case if there is an inquest it won't be before the morning. We have time to think."

"To think? You're crazy! Your projects are over. The only advice I can give you is to disappear as quietly as possible."

"Wait a bit. You said just now that the baron's sisters were with his body. That means no one will disturb us here."

"What do you wish to wait for?"

Raymond remained silent for some time. A plan of action had already taken shape in his mind. He drew

near Claire, speaking in a low voice. "Listen, the programme I had laid out is no longer any good. But if there is no quail, we shall have pheasant. Since your baron cannot help us while alive, he is going to do something after death. First, who are his heirs?"

"I know nothing about it."

"What? He was going to marry you and he said nothing to you on this subject? This man who adored you?"

"No."

"That's incredible. But if what you claim is true, the death of your fiancé has left you in a situation as uncertain as before."

"Yes."

"Everything he has will go to his sisters."

"Yes."

"In this case, we must work without gloves. Before these country people remember that you are not one of the family. We must act while there is still time."

"What are you talking about?"

"Didn't this baron possess some things of considerable value, gold ornaments, collars of green jade? Before all that is put under lock and key tomorrow morning, we ought to pick up a few little trinkets."

"Who?"

"You. You ought to know where he keeps his stuff. With so many servants wandering around, if anyone did miss something, they wouldn't know where to put the blame. But we must act quickly, it is our only chance of setting ourselves up. I repeat what I have already told you—we'll work together. With the money that I raise I will set up my business at Biarritz and your fine dream of becoming rich one day will not be completely lost."

Claire's indignation made her speechless. The cynicism

of Raymond was beyond belief. She murmured: "It is a robbery that you propose."

He shrugged. "An unpleasant word. Call it rather a reparation. I offer you a way of rectifying the forgetfulness of your fiancé who has not had foresight enough to think of your interests. They say that he had no feeling for his family and that his sisters will be furious when they hear the Will. And you want to be generous with these people who have for you only harsh words and consider you a scheming woman."

"Don't try to justify yourself."

"You are a fool!" Raymond cried.

Claire heard a step in the corridor. She ran to the door, listened and whispered: "Hide yourself quickly in my bathroom. They are coming."

Raymond disappeared. In a few moments came three little knocks on the door. Claire opened and saw the Count of Villesec. He entered, asking: "You heard nothing strange on the terrace a few minutes ago?"

"No, why?"

"Charles and I were in the drawing-room when we heard a noise of stones falling on the walk."

"You surprise me. I have noticed nothing."

"Charles went out and did not see anything. As it happened on your side of the house I came to ask you."

Thierry withdrew. Claire waited a few moments, then opened the bathroom door. When he came out, she said, completely exasperated, "That's enough. You are going to get out and fast. I've no intention of helping you rob a dead man. All I can do for you is to cover up your exit. I'll go down and chat with the Villesecs in the drawing-room. That will give you a chance for a getaway. This will be our last talk."

Raymond turned white with anger. Claire's revolt was like a belt-buckle in the face. He looked her up and down, as if he would like to use his fists on her, and probably would have done so if they had been alone in the house. But he was too smart to do such a thing under the circumstances.

Suddenly his eye fell on the diamond solitaire Claire wore. He knew rings. This one had at least a pure five-carat stone, which would simplify his immediate problems. Before Claire could defend herself, he had seized her wrist and slipped off the ring, saying: "You owe me this compensation for what your stupidity has cost me. Four flusher! You didn't tell me the old gent had given you this sparkler. You can always scream for the family. Don't worry, they'll be very happy to find their opinion of you confirmed. You're entertaining a lover while the body of your fiancé is stretched cold and stiff in another room. So long, sweetheart."

Before she could recover, Raymond opened the window. The night was moonless. He climbed down the wall and dropped lightly on the terrace.

XIII

AT eight-thirty, Amelia served black coffee to the whole family. While carrying the cups, she did not stop lamenting: "What unhappiness! Can it be possible? Such a good master! Christine is crying in the kitchen. Jerome has collapsed. It is frightful . . .!"

Suddenly they heard the sound of a trunk dragged along the corridor. Charles rose and asked: "What's going on there?"

"It is Angela who is going to set out in half an hour."

"Ah! Nothing of the sort. Come on, Thierry."

The two rushed out and hurled themselves before the housekeeper. "Where are you going?"

"I have been told to get out and I'm going."

"You are not leaving. Go back to your room and wait for the arrival of the police."

"But, Monsieur. I have nothing to say to the police."

"But they are anxious to talk to you, more than to any of us. Put down your bags and return to your room. I forbid you to go out."

Before the firm attitude of the two men who barred the passage, Angela shrugged and turned back.

Charles and Thierry rejoined their wives. "We have just prevented Angela from giving us the slip."

Cecile regarded her husband without affection. "Ah! you were certainly inspired to give that creature another twenty-four hours!"

Charles did not reply. Thierry poured himself another coffee. Nose in cup, he murmured: "This pays, this Christian charity! Without your fine gesture, Stephen would perhaps be still alive. I saw Dr. Dellecroix half an hour ago and he said it looked strongly like a case of poisoning."

An automobile horn interrupted Thierry. An ambulance and a police motor cycle came roaring in the drive. Three men got out; Commissioner Fiori; Inspector Leblond, and the doctor of forensic medicine, Maubreuil. Charles met them at the door and took them at once to the dead man's room.

Dellecroix started off, oratorically. "Gentlemen, you are face to face with an awful suspicion of foul play." He pointed a lean dramatic finger at the corpse. "There he lies, gentlemen, this wealthy nobleman of the Loire. This affair is going to make a stir. Look commissioner, at this tube of digitalis. Ten drops a day prescribed. Look at it and tell me, have you ever seen digitalis of such a colour?"

Maubreuil and Fiori looked closely at the tube. The doctor exclaimed: "It looks queer. This colour and this sediment at the bottom."

"Analysis will give the answer," Fiori remarked.

The two doctors gave the corpse a superficial examination. They noted the presence of red spots on the skin of the deceased.

"Eruptions of death agony," murmured Maubreuil.

Dellecroix called Claire and asked her what had happened before the death of the baron. She related to them that after taking the digitalis the sick man had suffered violent dizziness and a fainting spell; his pulse became weaker and weaker. She tried to make him drink some-

thing. Swallowing was impossible. The end came swiftly, accompanied by seizures and trembling of the knees.

The doctor of forensic medicine looked at his colleague. He pronounced one word: "Poisoning."

Dellecroix nodded. "It seems beyond doubt."

Fiori turned, rubbing his hands briskly. "A case for the police. Take the body to the morgue. When I have the result of the autopsy, I will inform the magistrate. Meantime the Inspector and I will commence a little inquest on the spot."

Bruno Fiori was a fellow countryman of Napoleon Bonaparte. Swarthy and muscular, he had served with distinction in the war. As Commissioner of the Thirty-third Mobile Brigade of Police, Fiori had already, at forty, won a reputation for astute and fearless handling of cases. His piercing black eyes omitted not the smallest detail of fact in the most assorted set of circumstances.

He was known and liked among newspapermen for his tolerance and clear precise answers.

When Fiori had looked over the deposition of Doctor Dellecroix, he said to him: "This first detail noted here. Just who is this man who received us?"

"He is Charles Tramillet, an industrialist at Courbevoie. He married Cecile, sister of the deceased. Her younger sister, Henrietta, is married to the Count of Villesec and lives in the village of Plessis. They were all present at the death of the baron. There was also a governess and a housekeeper in the château. I might add that for three years the housekeeper, Angela, was the baron's mistress."

"Ah!"

"Gossip also has it that for the last few months, the baron neglected the housekeeper for the governess. She was at the bedside when he died."

"Thank you, doctor. That may be helpful."

Dellecroix left. The commissioner and Leblond began an examination of the dead man's room. One of the first things Fiori discovered was the paper hidden in the drawer of the night-table. He called his assistant. "Look at this, Leblond."

They read the last wishes of the deceased. Leblond whistled. "He has given everything to the governess."

"Quite right. And it was drawn last night."

"Was there a motive for the crime?" Leblond murmured.

Fiori smiled. "Not so fast, Inspector. That would be too neat. You carry on here. I'm going to have a little talk with the family."

Several moments later, Fiori, acting the gracious host, received the two couples in the salon. It was his custom, except when dealing with hardened criminals to proceed with gentility and tact. "Monsieur Tramillet, will you introduce the other members of the family?"

Charles complied. Fiori gave a handsome bow and continued, "Let us sit down and talk. I am interested in whatever has occurred since your arrival."

The others let Charles speak. He gave a résumé of the visit, concluding with the death-bed attendance of the governess. Fiori listened attentively. When Charles had finished, the commissioner nodded. "Good, Monsieur. Now regarding this governess, was she the best person to look after the baron?"

Henrietta cried in an aggrieved tone. "He drove us out in order to have this woman."

Fiori regarded her a moment. "I see." He turned to Charles. "Monsieur, do you have any idea why the baron preferred the attendance of a stranger to that of his own sisters?"

"It's quite simple," Charles replied. "Stephen had fallen desperately in love with the girl. He made his feelings clear to everyone. We are sure that he intended to marry her."

"Did he say so?"

Thierry observed. "No, but I found out through conversation with the clerk of Monsieur Grippelet, the lawyer for the estate."

The commissioner nodded, rubbing his chin reflectively. "A smart bit of detection, Monsieur." He continued, after a moment. "As to the housekeeper. What were the baron's relations with her?"

"Angela had been his mistress for a long time," Charles said. "The affair had reached the point where he forgot all prudence."

"What do you mean by that? He was seen publicly with her?"

"Worse than that. This woman had a past. Do you remember the Sommerel case at Cambrai in 1938?"

Fiori shook his head. "I was then beginning my career."

Charles went on. "This same woman looked after an old invalid, Jules Sommerel, a former Inspector of Finance. He died of poison. Angela was arrested and held for several months. She was finally released for lack of proof."

"That is very interesting. I hope that the baron was unaware of this when he took the woman into his service."

"Naturally. For three years she acted the part of a

model servant. Then last September I came across an account of the case in an old newspaper. The baron was struck dumb. We advised him to get rid of this charming wanton on short notice."

"What did he do?"

"He said he'd think it over."

"Curious."

"Not so much, when you realize that this poor Stephen had the wench under his skin. Of course he was no coward. A timid man would have followed our advice. Was it bravado on Stephen's part or the kisses that he could not do without? Whatever the reason, six months later Angela was still here."

Cecile put in a word. "It was my husband and I who asked her to leave when Stephen had his heart attack."

"Then she set out before the baron's death?"

"No, she cried and appealed to our feelings so we gave her twenty-four hours' grace to make her preparations."

Thierry added: "We intended to drive her into Tours this morning. Under the circumstances, however, we thought it best to keep her here."

"Good. That will make things easier for me. Did the baron have any enemies in the district?"

"No one anxious to shorten his days. He was not friendly. He lived like a recluse except where the village girls were concerned."

Fiori nodded, drew a long breath. "One more question. Whom does the family suspect?"

"The housekeeper," Charles said quickly.

"Well, I am going to question her in your presence. Where is she?"

"In her room," Thierry replied.

"Bring her down."

Five minutes later, the Count of Villesec returned, pale and anxious. "The housekeeper has disappeared," he announced.

Commissioner Fiori raised his eyebrows. The others gave exclamations. Charles cried: "How disappeared? But we had particularly ordered Jerome to see that she remained in her room."

Thierry replied: "We must question the gamekeeper. I will look for him."

He went toward the door when someone knocked. Fiori cried: "Come in!"

Angela appeared. She spoke quickly. "Jerome told me that the police were here and that the inquest on the death of Monsieur de Montenoy had begun. I told him that I wanted to be heard at once. I've just come up the service stair."

The commissioner told Angela to sit down.

"You are called Angela Lepeyron. How long have you been in the service of the baron?"

"Since December, 1945."

"What was your relationship with your employer?"

Angela hesitated. "What do you mean?"

"I mean were you only the housekeeper or something more?"

She said finally, "I was his mistress."

"For three years?"

"Yes."

"You carried on your relationship up to his death?"

"No. It stopped about three months ago."

"Because of a quarrel?"

"Because of the arrival of the governess."

"You mean the baron abandoned you for her?"

"Yes. Little by little this flirt wormed her way into his

good graces. I have watched her little game for months and I know very well the sort she is. She set out to cut my throat and she succeeded."

"Mademoiselle took your place and you hated her for it."

"No!" Angela's voice was hard, contemptuous.

"Why no?" asked the commissioner. "A woman becomes your rival, drives you from your master's bed and you don't mind?"

Angela gave him a sombre look. "I accepted the situation."

"You were resigned?"

"Yes."

"Resigned!" Cecile cried, and Henrietta added: "Why she roamed the corridors like a beast in a cage."

Fiori swung toward the sisters. "Thank you, good ladies. I will conduct the investigation." He returned to Angela. "Did you approach the baron's sick-room?"

She flew out angrily, "No, he was looked after by his new woman."

"And you were to leave today?"

Angela pointed at Cecile and Charles. "Those two tried to drive me into the street!"

Charles observed, "You understand, Monsieur, that we couldn't allow here a woman who already——"

Fiori stopped him. "A moment, we are coming to that. Show me your identity card, Angela Lepeyron."

She handed him her family book. He glanced at it and exclaimed: "But you are a widow!"

"Yes, my husband Marcel died in a German prison camp."

"What was your maiden name?"

"Anne Angela Verstraete."

"I am going to ask you a simple question. Were you ever a nurse before the war?"

Angela looked away. She said in a low voice: "Yes, I was a nurse."

Fiori continued in his most genial conversational manner. "Did you not look after an old gentleman at Cambrai?"

She fidgeted, gave a weak smile. "Yes, that's right."

"Would it have been old Sommerel that was your patient then? Jules Sommerel, retired functionary in the Finance Department?"

Angela became increasingly shaky as these details unrolled. She whispered, "Yes."

"Old Sommerel died at Cambrai in 1938?"

"Yes."

"What was the cause of death?"

Angela could barely speak. "He was poisoned."

"Poisoned by what? Your employers seem to have had bad luck."

"By digitalis. But I had nothing to do with it."

"They arrested you. And after two months in prison, you were released."

"Naturally. I was completely cleared."

"Lack of evidence," Fiori remarked.

Angela cried: "What evidence could they have when I was innocent?"

Fiori was seated, elbows on the table, toying with an ivory paper-cutter. He breathed a sympathetic sigh. "It is unpleasant to be accused of a crime that one has not committed. But to come back to your position as house-keeper at Plessis. Yesterday you were asked to leave. But having put on a crying act before the family, you obtained a delay of twenty-four hours. It has been said

you spent that time roaming the corridors of the château like an animal in a cage."

"I did nothing of the sort!" Angela shouted. "These women hate me. They are telling lies to make a case against me."

"Perhaps, Angela," Cecile remarked icily, "you can explain to the commissioner what you were doing when I caught you outside Stephen's bathroom last night."

"I had been obtaining some blouses from a wardrobe and I stopped in the corridor to find out how he was."

"Natural concern," observed Fiori, with an ironic smile. "You were so distressed that you had to find out the condition of this good master who had just fired you."

"And that isn't all," said Thierry. "Her light was burning at two o'clock this morning. We saw it from the terrace."

"What about it?" Angela asked, turning on the Count of Villesec. "I had to leave the first thing in the morning. I was packing my bags."

Fiori observed lightly, "You spent an entire day packing, like film stars who travel with twenty trunks. In your last twenty-four hours here you led an intensely active life."

Angela threw herself into a chair. She glared at the family.

"Your coming here was a curse upon poor dear Stephen," said Henrietta, beginning to cry again.

Angela rose, trembling. Leblond, who had joined the investigation, got between the two women. He forced the housekeeper to sit down again. "Don't make matters worse for yourself," he said to her.

"I have nothing to regret."

"We will see," muttered Thierry.

She blazed at him. "Shut up, you dirty hypocrite!

The baron could never stand the sight of you. God will punish such false Christians as you."

Fiori cutshort the outburst. "Let us leave God out for the present. We will continue our talk at the police-station."

Angela looked at him, suddenly pale. "You are arresting me? What for? I had nothing to do with the baron's illness. I was not even in the sick-room. It is the governess you want! She is the one! She was with him every minute. No one else could come near."

"Thanks for your advice," said Fiori dryly. "We are still interested in you. You should be accustomed to the interest of the police by this time. But we are not charging you. We only offer you hospitality for a short time as a material witness for the official inquest. If the inquest shows that the baron died a natural death, we will send you on your way, to continue your career of looking after old men. Let us hope the next one has better luck in your arms. If poisoning is proved, the magistrate will determine our future course of action."

He gave her a courteous bow, and turned to Leblond. "Take Madame Lepeyron to the car and tell the chauffeur to keep an eye on her."

When Angela had departed, Fiori shuffled through the notes he had taken. Henrietta and Cecile gave little nods of satisfaction. Charles put in an approving oar.

"A wise move, commissioner. That woman belongs under lock and key."

Fiori blinked. "I must emphasize once more that the housekeeper has not been arrested. She is detained as a material witness. On such differences are legal systems founded. No one is going to be arrested until the result of the inquest is known." He turned to Leblond. "Bring down the governess," he ordered.

While they waited, Fiori questioned the two sisters concerning the family attitude of the baron. When he learned that the relatives came to the château no more than twice a year, he did not appear surprised.

"The social organism that one calls the family is too often no more than a façade for the most profound disunity," the commissioner observed. He waved a pudgy hand. "Innumerable inquests have revealed depths of hatred, among members of the same blood that are astonishing. Vengeance, envy, greed . . ." he smiled at them, whispering: "These familiar family sentiments lasting to the grave."

He was silent. A brief unpleasant echo hung in the room. Suddenly the door opened and Claire appeared.

Fiori bounded to his feet. "A pleasure, Mademoiselle. A pleasure. Just sit here, please, I'm going to ask you a few little questions."

He droned quickly through the routine information concerning Claire's background. She sat rigidly, a handkerchief crushed between her hands. Her replies came in a low trembling voice. Suddenly the commissioner, looking up, fired: "Just how did you change from a governess to a nurse?"

She felt all their eyes upon her. She mastered her emotion and murmured: "The baron gave me his friendship."

"Friendship!" Henrietta sniffed, audibly.

Fiori gave her a sly wet smile. She felt his dark eyes exploring the lines of her body. "Just how far did this friendship go?"

"The baron always behaved like a gentleman . . . We used to have long talks together in the library."

The commissioner nodded. He continued to look

knowingly at the girl. "The housekeeper, it appears, has a different view of these talks. She does not think the affair to have been only a matter of friendship. She said you were in the old man's bed."

The sudden brutal declaration was like a thong across the young girl's face. She recoiled, saying: "It is false, false . . . I never . . . why, everyone knows what she is, bad, a common woman . . ."

Fiori held up his hand. "Not everyone, Mademoiselle, has had your advantages. Still the housekeeper has learned from life." One felt that the case did not displease him. He had the dislike of the parvenu for class and distinction of birth.

Charles spoke scathingly. "Mademoiselle has a singular interpretation of friendship. The evening of our arrival at the château I surprised Stephen and this young girl embracing in the corridor. They certainly acted the part of lovers. I've never seen anything more ardent."

"It is absolutely true," said the Count of Villesec.

"Yes, I remember," Claire cried. "It was our first kiss. We said good night. I went to my room . . ."

Charles went on stroking his fleshy jaw. "Of course, Mademoiselle, whenever you were in the same room with Stephen, he couldn't take his eyes from you. He acted like a man completely possessed."

"I know that the baron paid court to me," Claire flashed. "But it is ridiculous to conclude that I was going to his room."

The liquid glow of the Corsican's eyes enveloped her. His voice purred: "Let us agree that you successfully defended your honour against the advances of this elderly cavalier of the Loire. It is still true that he insisted on your presence alone in the sick chamber."

"I looked after the baron with all my devotion." Claire replied. And then adding, curiously, like the housekeeper: "I have nothing to reproach myself with."

"Certain prescriptions were prescribed by Dellecroix."

"Which I have given. The prescription had been made up by a druggist in Tours. These gentlemen went into the city for that purpose. Monsieur Tramillet brought the medicine to me himself."

"Can you have made a mistake?"

"Certainly not. I followed the doctor's instructions to the letter."

He looked away in the creeping silence. His fingers tapped softly the polished marquetry of the delicate eighteenth-century table. "The two doctors agree that the death of the baron has the appearance of poisoning." Suddenly he shot her a quick hard glance, the eyes opaque like black glass. "We must hold you for the inquest, Mademoiselle. We will talk again at police headquarters. Leblond, take Mademoiselle to the car."

Claire leaped to her feet. "I'm not guilty of anything! I want to telephone to a lawyer who is a friend of my family. I shall say nothing more until I have talked with him."

Fiori's brows made black bristling arches. He exclaimed: "What? But my dear, to require a lawyer, one must be accused of something. It is not the case with you. You are not under arrest. We only want to talk to you."

The girl was silent. Two spots of colour burned in her pale cheeks. Slowly she turned, went out with Leblond.

The family exchanged astonished looks. Thierry observed: "I don't care for that girl's attitude."

Cecile added, warmly: "Perhaps we are wrong to

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think only of that Flemish creature. What is your opinion, commissioner?"

Fiori spread his hands. He gave a shadowy smile. "Madame, in my work, one has seen too much goodness—concealing the knife."

XIV

FIORI had asked the relatives of the deceased to remain at the château and put themselves at the disposal of justice. Charles, Cecile, Thierry and Henrietta stayed. Every day they read with stupor or indignation the scandalous details given in the newspapers concerning the "Montenoy affair." Charles gave vent to his feelings in an interview with Serreau, special correspondent of the *Paris Star*.

"Monsieur, you newspapermen are telling all sorts of wild tales about our private lives. The only thing that matters is to sell copy. The hell with the rest."

Serreau tried to pacify him. "I know some of the boys go pretty far. What exactly did you have in mind?"

A pile of newspapers lay on the library table. Charles picked up one. "Look at this write-up in the *Evening Express*. I am described as a small suburban operator. They refer to me as a salesman. They don't know that I'm the owner of a big chemical factory at Courbevoie with a capital of forty millions and a force of 250 workers."

Serreau promised to correct this impression in his own account. Mollified, Charles went on: "It is already bad enough to lose a relative whom we all loved in such tragic circumstances without becoming the victims of such misrepresentations. The *Touraine Courier* has had the nerve to publish our four photos, my wife and I and the Villesecs, alongside those of Angela and Claire. We look like a

bunch of gangsters. The casual reader would not know the guilty from the innocent. It's disgusting! And the picture magazines are just as bad. I've just received this morning the weekly, *Crimes*. Take a look at this photograph under the heading: 'At the haunt of the Borgias of the Loire.' It was taken during a luncheon on the terrace. I've no idea how the newspaper obtained a print. It looks like a picnic of the chain gang. Stephen already looks ill; I offer him a glass as if it were hemlock while Angela leers in the background. And underneath the caption reads: 'At a joyous occasion in Plessis. The victim, surrounded by his brothers and sisters, is marked with a cross. Baron de Montenoy little suspected that one year later he would be treacherously struck down by one of his household!'"

The journalist nodded. "I understand you, Monsieur Tramillet."

Charles raised a finger. "I pass over the crude insinuations of this article: my wife married me because of my good prospects, Villesec was married for his title, Montenoy combines the less attractive features of Casanova, Gagliostro and the Marquis de Sade. I hope you can correct this a little."

"I'll do my best," Serreau promised. "I've been wondering about something. Perhaps you can give me the answer. Did the baron have any fear of being poisoned?"

"Never. And yet six months before he had been warned of the housekeeper's true character."

Serreau lifted his brows. "Very interesting. He knew all about old Sommerel and still kept the Flemish girl?"

"That's right." Charles shrugged.

Serreau gave a thoughtful glance about the library. "Do you believe in this woman's guilt?" he asked.

Charles, playing with his watch-chain, made an evasive gesture. "Morally yes. I think she was quite capable of doing in the old boy for showing her the gate. Practically speaking, I don't see how she managed to slip the poison past Claire."

"That's an excellent summing-up of the problem."

They were interrupted by Thierry. The Count of Villesec was in full mourning, even carrying a black-bordered handkerchief. He sniffed: "Pardon. I've just had a call from Grippelet's office-boy. He wants to see us on a matter of the most urgent importance."

"Can you guess what it is, my sorrowing friend?" Charles turned with a touch of his old raillery.

"This is no occasion for frivolity," the Count observed stiffly. He gave Serreau a suspicious stare. "As for you, young man, you will please no longer refer to me in your stories as a defrocked priest."

"I have never done so, sir," Serreau assured him.

The Count looked at him moodily. "Someone has, however. It must stop at once. I studied at the Jesuit College in Orléans; but I have never been in Orders." He turned with a cough. "Are you coming, Charles?"

Old Grippelet wheezed slowly from his chair as the family Montenoy was announced. He was as huge as a department store Santa Claus and had a small purple nose between folds of flesh. He was known, not unreasonably, as a "good fork"; with addiction to roast pork and burgundy. The peasants in the district swore by "Papa Grippelet" and brought him their troubles. Now he assumed the mien of family counsellor and sorrowing

friend, as the visitors entered the small bulging rat-trap of Grippelet's office.

"You have my heartfelt sympathy," he murmured in unctuous tones. "Baron de Montenoy was more than a client. He was a friend. I looked after his affairs for fifteen years. I know the kind of man he was. The district has suffered an irreparable loss."

They bowed, a few polite phrases fluttered out like tired birds, and then they got down to business.

"The baron had made his arrangements in case anything happened," the lawyer said. "Naturally I drew up his will. We discussed the bequests from the legal aspect and I tried to carry out his wishes as he directed. Here is the last testament of Baron Stephen de Montenoy."

Like a sleight-of-hand artist plucking rabbits from the hat, the huge creature deftly extracted a parchment from a leather folder. He held it up. "The baron preferred that I open it before the family rather than in the Surrogate's office. It is less fuss." He put on a pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez and began to read in a high creaking voice.

Although not unexpected, the clause creating the Montenoy Foundation for metaphysical research created an immediate atmosphere of gloom. Thierry muttered something about "heathenish practices"; while Henrietta who had exercised remarkable self-control up to this point began to dab at her eyes. Only Charles remained calm, a sardonic smirk on his heavy features.

The lawyer wheezed and turned a page.

"Ten million francs to my beloved godchild, Françoise."

Thierry's face became pale; beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. He gripped the back of a chair.

"One million francs to my cook, Amelia."

"One million francs to my gardener, Jerome."

A clawlike hand appeared in the air, a gasp was heard. Thierry turned like one in a trance to Henrietta, down whose cheeks the tears were flowing.

"Three million francs to the Community Chest of Plessis."

An awful tomblike silence reigned. After such bequests anything was to be expected. Perhaps a million or two to the dustman; a substantial pension to the local ratcatcher.

Old Grippet adjusted his pince-nez. His eyes gleamed like two agates. He appeared for some strange reason to be enjoying himself.

"Seven millions, one for each child, to the Count and Countess of Villesec."

A sigh escaped Henrietta. The Count was past expression. He appeared like one who has been snatched from the lowest circle of doom. So extreme was his relief that he hardly heard the final outrageous clause giving three millions more to the wealthy Tramillet than to himself.

Cecile gave a shrill contemptuous laugh. "Ten little millions! How characteristic of Stephen. Everything for the ectoplasms; nothing for his own flesh and blood."

Henrietta turned, martyred. "At least, dear Cecile, you have more than we!"

The lawyer listened in silence. For him the reading of testaments was a never-ending source of revelation in human nature. The mere glimpse of red seals and stiff crinkly parchment seemed to have an intoxicating effect. All the violent emotions were unchained: rage, jealousy, hatred. Ah! their faces would cry, could they but get hands on that departed spirit how they would make him dance for his wicked jokes!

The office boy entered. He approached Grippelet. "Fiori is here, sir."

The lawyer rose and left the room. The members of the family exchanged glances. Cecile broke the silence. "What is this metaphysics? Are these women connected with it?"

Charles laughed. "My dear Cecile, it's worse than women. Our precious brother has been beguiled into the temple of magicians and astrologers. I told you about it. The Montenoy fortune will be devoted to raising ghosts and conversing through trumpets with Indian guides."

Thierry shuddered. Henrietta, who seemed herself to have fallen into some strange spell, had a fixed hypnotized gaze. She held up the fingers of one hand, counting: "Ten millions to Françoise, one million to the cook, one million to the gardener, three millions to the Community Chest . . ." she trailed off, staring at the others with weak astonishment.

Cecile cried: "At least that vile creature will have nothing!"

The Count of Villesec nodded solemnly. He had a grip on himself and was already calculating the investment of the seven million. He was even thinking of some speculation; a million or two in vineyards, for instance. A successful stroke would more than double his capital.

Grippelet returned. He began to stuff papers into a large morocco leather case.

"Something new?" Charles asked.

The lawyer nodded with a preoccupied air. "The magistrate wants to see me. There's been an important find at the château."

They crowded around. Grippelet threw them a tantalizing glance. He held up his hands. "In good time, my

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friends. Another will has turned up. It will be necessary to have a little investigation.”

He turned amid a stunned silence and walked with short prancing steps to the door.

XV

SERREAU saw the family group slowly picking its way up the gravelled drive. He came to meet them, scenting new developments.

"You have a statement, Monsieur Tramillet."

Charles waved a pudgy hand. "Statement? Ask the Count here. He knows as much as I."

Thierry was in a pitiable condition. The shock of seeing seven million consumed before his eyes had left him utterly broken. He looked in his rusty black like an ageing forlorn crow. He came funereally along the drive.

"A statement, Count? I'll see it's right."

Thierry turned a haggard eye on the reporter. His lips moved, but no words came.

"At least give me a hint," Serreau begged.

The Count of Villesec looked heavenward. God had played a ruinous joke. Or—the devil was loose. Suddenly his voice grated like an ancient hinge. "A secret will has been discovered," he croaked. "They are examining it now in Tours."

"Another will? To cancel the first?"

The Count choked. He gave a stiff little nod.

"Thanks, Monsieur. So long." Serreau was off down the drive on his way to Tours.

In the long tiled corridor, adorned with brass spittoons, of the Tours court chambers, Serreau paced impatiently with half-a-dozen colleagues. And among these jaded

slouching figures with cigarette coughs and bad teeth was the bright icy stare of Tania Grezyl, who outranked them all in corruption. Thin, with small features, and a blaze of henna hair, Tania had the absorbed secret face of a vicious girl. She had written a best-seller called: *Fourteen Men and a Woman*, that laid bare the intimate details of her love-life. The editor of the *Forum*, a weekly catering to the prurient mind, had decided, on the strength of a perusal of Tania's "confessions," that anyone who could gather within a single book so much perversity must have a great deal to tell his own readers. And so it proved.

In a few moments the door of the magistrate's office opened and Achille Séguat, puffing a cigar, appeared. He wore a blue pin-stripe suit and his brows were shaggy above a fiery face. "I've an announcement for you, boys." He had a hail-fellow manner with the press, feeling that favour among engines of public opinion was a proper insurance against a skittish electorate. "The police investigation of Monsieur de Montenoy's effects has uncovered a second will that annuls completely the first. In this second will, everything—get it, everything—is left to Claire Grandjean, the governess whom the baron intended to marry in a few weeks' time. Nobody else has a look-in."

Tania was the first to pop the question in everyone's mind. "Did the girl friend know about this second will?"

Séguat nodded. "Of course. She was looking after the deceased day and night. She had put the document in the drawer of the baron's night-table."

Serreau came back: "Well, then, Claire Grandjean knew that if the old man died she would get his money whether or not they were married?"

"Exactly, my friend."

Tania threw in a final word. "She knew it, but the housekeeper didn't."

The magistrate gave her a knowing look. "That's right. The housekeeper had already been fired and could not come near the sick-room."

"That's going to give Marescaux something to think about!" someone said.

The "poison plot of Plessis" had become a nine days' wonder in the metropolitan press. A dearth of trunk torsos and hatchet cases had compelled the more lurid sheets to concentrate on this provincial drama. Naturally, political implications were read into the affair. Organs of the Right exonerated Claire, the daughter of aristocracy, and went on to editorialize about the Godless and lawless condition of the people in these latter days. The Communist papers, on the other hand, found in Angela a martyr of the toiling masses. Much was made of the "1789 mentality" of the château dwellers along the Loire and the "Droit du Seigneur" which they practised. It was darkly hinted that a large sum of American money had been placed at the disposal of the prosecution to convict this "woman of the people."

The day following the convocation of the press, Ségurat called Fiori to his chambers. The police inspector found Ségurat bristling with anger. He thrust a copy of *Forum* at Fiori. "Take a look. That scandalmonger is making fools of us."

In enormous black type, Fiori read: "Was the innocent maid of Plessis a Queen of Paris vice?" Below Tania's

name followed a discussion of the hopeless limitations of the official mind wasting precious time in futile investigations of innocent people while neglecting to explore the past of a suspect already in detention. Séguat, the piece went on, while a man of good intentions, had no imagination whatever and was mainly concerned with the prospects of his pension. Fiori and Leblond were sound enough for street-corner robberies, but speedily found themselves beyond their depth in a case such as the present. As a result, with the exception of Fiori's "lucky find" of the second will, nothing had been done to bring the crime home to the real culprit.

After this opening blast, Tania mentioned the public duty of the press to correct the errors and omissions of the authorities. At great trouble and some personal risk she had brought to light the following facts about the "erst-while innocent" of a rich man's dotage. Claire Grandjean, this daughter of an ancient ruined line, had already a considerable life before arriving at Plessis. She was well known in racy haunts of St. Germain-des-Prés. "Claire?" a friend of those days had said. "Sure, I remember her. We used to get drunk together. Say, that girl had sex appeal. The men came flocking!" To a question whether Claire had led a wild life our informant replied: "Well, no. At least she kept it to herself. She was the quiet kind. I know she fell hard for a character named Raymond who used to hang around the Brooklyn. We all thought they were going to get hitched when one fine day Raymond took a fast powder. He hasn't been seen since. I've heard they wanted to have a little talk with Raymond down at Headquarters."

Tania concluded that while the governess of course might be pure and spotless she had kept strange company

in the past. In her opinion, Claire was capable of playing a deep and clever game, trading on her aristocratic lineage to lull suspicions while secretly indulging a taste for vicious pleasures. The Brooklyn, Tania revealed, was a joint in the full meaning of that term and catered to some choice fancies. It was here that the daughter of nobility had met her intended husband! Let the reader draw his own conclusions. Tania offered the results of her research in the interest of justice and public morality.

Fiori put down the journal. "She has a certain wit," he commented. "I like particularly the touch about street-corner robberies."

"Sex-crazed bitch!" Ségurat fumed. "I, who have administered the laws in the district and city of Tours honourably for twenty-two years, am served up to the readers of this filthy rag as a doddering old man dreaming of a pension. I—I'll bar this streetwalker from the court!"

"Don't take it so hard," Fiori remonstrated. "Tania may have something after all. This girl's past may bear looking into. Have you made inquiries?"

"I've asked them in Paris for a dossier," Ségurat replied. "You know what Sûreté is. They don't give a damn for the provinces. They'll investigate a pickpocket in Paris before a provincial case for the assize."

Fiori nodded. "They don't seem to be rushing matters. But if what Tania writes is true we need to get moving and fast!"

Ségurat rose abruptly. He glared from beneath bristling brows. "Have you made a thorough search of the rooms occupied by Claire and the housekeeper?"

"Yes, certainly. Leblond has turned everything inside out."

"Get your hat!" the magistrate snapped. "We're going

up there ourselves. If this scribbler is right, the girl may have left something that will give us a clue." He plunged through the door like a maddened bull.

The two reached the château without delay and went at once to Claire's room. A thorough ransacking convinced them that Leblond had after all done his work well. They uncovered nothing of interest.

Discouraged, Fiori wandered to the window. He leaned out, resting both elbows on the ledge. Suddenly he gave an exclamation. "Look here." Fiori pointed to some faint traces of mud on the frame. "And below, on the brick." More dried mud clung to projecting cornices.

The police officer turned with a gleam. "Didn't Angela say that the governess kept a rendezvous with a man? A man that no one saw, but who sent two letters to the château?"

The magistrate nodded. "That was part of her little game to throw everything on her rival. But I'd like a look at those letters."

Fiori frowned. "She must have torn them up. What do you make of the wall?"

"Someone must have been climbing."

The commissioner measured the distance with a half-shut eye. "Like a cat," he commented. "He must be the athletic type. Well!" He turned.

"Where are you going?" Ségurat growled.

"I want to have a word with the cook!" Fiori bounded out of the room.

The magistrate lingered near the window. He amused himself by imagining Tania Grezyl pilloried before him,

caught in some scandalous offence against public decency. Perhaps Article 231 of the Code. Yes, that would suit her tastes well. He nodded to himself. Fiori suddenly returned, dragging Amelia in his wake. She seemed anything but pleased at these attentions of authority. For her the police were always a misfortune.

"Now, then, old girl," the commissioner smiled. "What about these letters to Mademoiselle Claire?"

"Jerome found them in the box," she answered sulkily. "They weren't stamped so we knew our postman hadn't brought them."

Fiori gave the magistrate a significant look. He turned again to Amelia. "Listen to me. Did Mademoiselle have any particular retreat in the château other than this room?"

Amelia twisted her apron between her hands. "She spent much time in the library, sometimes alone, sometimes with Monsieur le Baron. And she used to go to the little pavilion in the park."

Fiori pounced. "The little pavilion? What did she do there?"

Amelia looked at him indignantly. Her beefy florid face turned a deeper red. "I'm sure I don't know. All these questions. Mademoiselle Claire was a very proper young girl!"

The policeman gave her a sly Corsican glance. "We'll see. Now where is the key to that pavilion?" He swung on his heel.

Once within Claire's study on the second floor of the pavilion, Fiori was like a keen terrier who has suddenly gone down-wind of a fox. He rubbed his hands together. His black eyes glowed and he whistled a little mountain tune. For a time this optimism seemed hardly justified.

They went through piles of notebooks filled with philosophic jottings, shook out huge tomes in German and English, opened every drawer in the little desk. Nothing. Fiori was wearily leafing through a dusty work on *transcendentalism* when he gave a sudden cry. "Here they are!"

They examined the two messages from Raymond with an exultant air. Ségurat, who never laughed, was positively beaming. He would be able to put Tania's nose out of joint with this find. "Here he is, the wandering fiancé. Look, the rascal has even taken a false identity, Ralph Jansen. He was in Tangier. It's a smuggling centre, isn't it?"

Fiori nodded. "One of the biggest. Let me have a bench warrant and we'll pick the boy up."

"You shall have it." The magistrate sat down and read over the letters once more. "What do you say, Fiori?" he exclaimed. "This throws a glaring light on the virginal pose of our governess. She made the old man turn hand-springs, while she was playing around with this fancy Dan. The old dotard was drawing up a will giving her everything, while she was getting plenty of loving on the side. The old story, isn't it?"

Fiori gave the magistrate a thoughtful stare. "I'm not so sure. Let's not let guesswork run away with us. In this second note, the boy friend complains Claire has been giving him the go-by. He doesn't sound like a very satisfied customer. He threatens, if she will not keep their date, to put in an appearance at the château."

"What do you make of it, then?"

Fiori pursed his lips. He gave the magistrate a back-thrusting glance. "The girl was in a fever to get rid of an embarrassing past. Remember, she had extracted a pro-

posal from Montenoy. The future was rosy. Then along comes Raymond! Good-bye to fifty million if the old man hears of him."

The magistrate lit a cigar, puffed contentedly. "Yes, Fiori. What next?"

"Our Raymond threatens to make a scene and expose Claire unless she meets him. What is her next move? To refuse means a public exposure, a scandal and the end of everything. To accept may mean endless blackmail, eventual discovery. There is only one possible way out."

"To get rid of Montenoy before he finds out and makes another will," the magistrate exclaimed. "Fiori, you've something. It all fits."

But the policeman shook his head. "It fits too well," he said. "Too neat. And you're leaving out Claire's intelligence. She might as well have knocked Montenoy on the head and rushed downstairs. Strychnine—and on a man who has just had a stroke! Could anything be more absurd?"

Séurat refused to be shaken. Already he saw in his mind's eye a salute to the triumphant authorities by a chastened Press. Already Claire and her guilty paramour stood in the dock. "She was desperate. Her gigolo was screaming for money. He may have threatened to give Montenoy the works himself." Suddenly he tore the cigar from his mouth, peered at Fiori. "By God, that's it! There's your case. He furnished the poison. A fellow like that would know how to pick up a little strychnine. It's open and shut."

"Not quite, my dear Achille." The policeman gave a sceptical shrug. "You're suggesting that a girl of fine family entered into a murderous plot with this street-corner Joe. It doesn't add up."

"Murder happens in the best families," Ségurat growled. "The casebooks are full of examples. Haven't you ever heard of the Duc de Praslin, a peer of France?"

Fiori smiled. "He loved another woman. His wife was in the way. He was a man of passion."

"There's no stronger passion than the prospect of a fortune!" The magistrate rose, dashing out his cigar. "We're going to put the playboy of Tangier under lock-and-key. Then we shall see."

XVI

SEVERAL days later Fiori was gratified to receive a call from the Bayonne police. Raymond Jeantier had been picked up after a chase during which shots were fired. He had been caught trying to dispose of a stolen diamond to a local jeweller. How did they know it was stolen? Why, the fellow offered the ring for less than a third of its value and when he was questioned took to his heels. They would put him on the next train for Tours.

Fiori rang off. His circulars had done some good. A smooth article like Jeantier might have talked himself out of custody if Bayonne had not had Fiori's description on file. He had spent precious hours in the St. Germain-des-Prés area to obtain a few physical details, but it had been well worth-while. Reaching for his hat, he decided to see the magistrate.

Achille Ségurat was in a towering ill temper. His face had an alarming beet-coloured congestion; between trembling fingers he clutched the latest issue of *Forum*. Wordless, he handed it to Fiori.

A headline trumpeted: "Is Justice paralysed while Murder runs amuck?" Under this blast, Tania launched a description of the terrifying struggle at Bayonne which resulted in the capture of Claire Grandjean's accomplice. One detective had been killed and two bystanders seriously wounded. (This, Fiori knew to be inaccurate. One

man had been grazed by a bullet and another had suffered a sprained ankle in the pursuit.)

Tania went on to point out that this dangerous criminal who had terrorized peaceful Biarritz had slipped through the fingers of the authorities at Tours. Proof of this was afforded by the ring that Raymond Jeantier had tried to sell. This ring, Tania revealed, was none other than the engagement ring given by Baron de Montenoy to his intended, Claire Grandjean. Obviously, she continued, even M. Achille Ségurat, wallowing like a hippopotamus in a mud-bath of false hypotheses, could deduce from this circumstance a connection between the events at Plessis and the deadly gunplay at Biarritz. Though she had received no orchids from this leviathan of the police courts for previous efforts on behalf of justice, Tania offered this additional information in the hope that like a gadfly it might sting the authorities into action.

"She has a fondness for the jungle," Fiori commented. "In a literary way as well as in bed."

Ségurat gripped his chair. "If she were only a man! I'd give her something to think about. The slut hides behind her skirts."

"In any case," the commissioner said calmly, "we ought to find out if the report is true."

Ségurat glowered and reached for a cigar. He bit off the end, spitting. "The governess never mentioned a ring. If she did give a diamond to this fellow, it means they're both in the game up to their necks. When a girl is the mistress of a rat like Jeantier, she'll do anything."

"Jeantier hasn't said how he obtained the ring," Fiori observed.

"There are only two possibilities. Either he robbed the château or the girl gave it to him."

"Even so," Fiori went on thoughtfully. "She might have done so simply to get rid of him."

Séguat puffed clouds of blue smoke. He stared at his colleague. "You seem to defend this little actress. You talk as if she were innocent."

Fiori said softly, "Perhaps she is."

"Why do you say that?"

The commissioner shrugged. "My intuition."

Séguat snorted. "Intuition. Where does that get us? We want facts!"

"Right," Fiori agreed. "But preconceived notions are not facts. You are sure she has murdered the old man. I've no preference. I keep my nose in the air, hunting proofs. Suppose you do hold the girl for murder: you know what will happen at the Assize. Marescaux will tear our case to pieces. He will have the jury in tears over this pretty victim."

Séguat flung back in his chair. His heavy body sagged. "What do you propose?" he growled.

Fiori gave him a shrewd look. "I think I'll have a little talk with Charles Tramillet."

"Tramillet? Why, in the name of God? He's told us everything."

"I'm not so sure he has. And, in any case, he interests me."

Séguat shook his head. "You're wasting time. We'll have the truth when Jeantier is broken down."

"Maybe." Fiori rose. He smiled, but his eyes were hard. "Monsieur Tramillet is a man of unexpected possibilities."

At the Tramillet chemical works in Courbevoie, the wily Corsican found the subject of his interest conferring and telephoning.

"A surprise, Monsieur Fiori." Charles nodded. He turned to his chief engineer. "We'll talk later." Settling back in a green leather swivel chair, with a smile, he remarked: "What can I do for you?"

The policeman took out cigarettes. "Smoke?"

Charles plucked a Gauloise. "Thanks." He glanced at the other. "You are making progress?"

Fiori frowned. "Not so much as we would like. Our two suspects continue to deny everything." He leaned forward. "I want to go over a few details. Nothing of great importance. But you can't be too careful in a case like the present."

"Fire away," Charles said. "I've told you all I know."

Fiori tapped his finger ends together. After a moment, he said: "I've been thinking over the dismissal of Angela. It's odd that she was allowed to stay on after the baron was taken ill."

Charles' eyes narrowed slightly. "I believe that was my responsibility. As I've stated."

"Precisely." The Corsican took out a memo and studied it. "According to the testimony at the inquest, your wife, Cecile Tramillet, told this woman to pack her bags and get out immediately. At that point you intervened and allowed Angela a stay of twenty-four hours." He looked up. "Why did you do that?"

Charles shrugged. "Oh, I felt sorry for the poor creature. And I thought a few hours more or less would make no difference. We all believed Stephen was in perfectly safe hands, guarded night and day by Claire."

"Still, you knew this woman's record?" Fiori pursued.

"Oh, very well. In fact, it was I who first put Stephen wise to the kind of dangerous honey-bee she was. He preferred to close his eyes. Love is strong."

Fiori nodded. His black eyes roved the comfortable office, the prosperity of bronze and leather. "And now you strongly suspect Angela?" he murmured.

"Yes," Charles picked up an ivory paper-cutter and pointed it at Fiori. "But where is all this getting us? You've got all these details in my official testimony."

Fiori agreed. Still, sometimes little things were overlooked. He liked to be thorough. Then he coughed and remarked: "This tube of digitalis brought from Tours. Could someone have interfered with it?"

"Interfered? What do you mean?"

The policeman gave Charles a direct look. "Put poison in the digitalis?"

"Oh, certainly not," Charles waved away the idea. "The tube never left my pocket the whole time. Naturally I don't know what happened afterwards. But there was no chance during the trip."

Fiori stroked his jaw. "Did you stop anywhere?"

The industrialist looked puzzled. "We went straight to Plessis from Tours. Oh, we did stop a few moments at Thierry's house. He picked up some clothes to wear at the château."

"You left the car?"

Charles nodded. "We went in together. But I always kept the digitalis by me." He straightened, folded his hands. "It's what happened to the tube at the château that's the crux of the matter. Those next fourteen hours are the milk in the coconut. Whoever cooked the tube did so during that period. Angela was roaming through the halls. My wife caught her outside Stephen's bathroom."

Fiori stared, a dull black opaque gleam. "I'm not convinced of the housekeeper's guilt," he said softly.

POISON AT PLESSIS

Charles lifted his hands and dropped them. "I can't see a stranger sneaking into the château with all of us there. He would have to be a magician not to be discovered."

Fiori picked up his hat. He had drawn a blank.

Disappointment at the results of the talk with Tramillet was lessened a day or so later when Fiori received a dossier from Paris concerning the industrialist's private life. Bissacq, who had brought the information, gave Fiori a foxy smile. "We struck a vein of gold," he said. "This good fellow, this model husband and sound businessman is completely in the clutches of a stripper at the Casino."

Fiori poised on his chair. He had an eager crouching air.

"This Dora d'Abba has a coloured maid who knows plenty," Bissacq went on. "Tramillet has been keeping the doll for two years. He was a good spender. Dora got everything she wanted; jewels, furs, dresses from Paquin, even a car. The maid said he was cuckoo about Dora. Used to call up in the middle of the night and talk to her. And was he jealous! If she only spoke to another man, he would go into a fit. Funny, huh?" He looked at Fiori. He was a neat small man with terrier eyes. "Here she was giving the Casino customers a load of everything she had five times a week, but he wouldn't let her speak to a man."

Fiori shrugged. "Safety in numbers," he said. "Go on."

Bissacq glanced at his report. "About six months ago Tramillet began to be short of funds. Dora wasn't putting out for nothing. Their relations were on a strictly cash basis. She began to play hard-to-get. Wouldn't let him

talk to her on the telephone. When once or twice he did get by the door, there was no loving for Charles. She told him either to bring the sugar or stay away. And she reminded him there were plenty of others waiting for a chance."

Fiori sat up straight, a sparkle in his eyes. "Yes, yes, very interesting."

The little man shuffled his papers. He continued in his dry precise voice. "There was a final scene. He was crying and begging for love. She said: 'You don't rate a thing. I'm sick of you. Now get the hell out of here!'" He shot a glance at his superior, enjoying the effect. Fiori was leaning forward tensely.

"Then Tramillet said he'd do anything, anything at all. She had to give him one more chance. 'All right,' Dora said. 'Just bring me two million to clear my debts.' He got up, shaking, and went out the door without a word. That was last month and he hasn't been back since."

"You've done well, Bissacq." Fiori gave the other an approving look. "I'll put you in for second-grade detective."

Terrier eyes snapped with pleasure. "Thanks, chief. It's the old case of 'cherchez la femme!' Say, she must be some piece, this Dora d'Abba."

"Go to the Casino, my friend. You'll find out." Fiori's eyes drilled a hole in the wall. "She gives private 'shows' for the older customers. I'm not an art lover myself."

XVII

IT was a weary and bitter Achille Ségurat who climbed each morning from a sleepless bed. No longer did he hail the fortune that had thrown a dramatic poisoning his way. The very name of Plessis brought a groan. In his dreams Ségurat marshalled immense leisurely snails hopelessly crawling after an elusive Angela, while in the background a monstrous henna-haired goddess chanted: "Pension, pension, pension!"

The magistrate would drag himself to a tasteless breakfast where, propped up against marmalade, would be another of those horrible papers with a new atrocity by "that bitch." Ségurat never referred to her in any other terms. Fascinated, his stomach crawling with hate, Ségurat would read the article right through, savouring each contemptuous phrase. Once she compared him to an African bull elephant, charging blindly about the jungle with huge flapping ears. She said that a certain magistrate's files resembled an ant's trove.

Ségurat's colleagues were amused. They began to snicker surreptitiously as he passed in the corridor; pointed remarks were made about the Vincennes Zoo. Others tried to take advantage of the magistrate's embarrassment and uncertainty. Marescaux, the peppery little lawyer defending Claire, demanded his client's instant freedom. He spoke bitterly of "Gestapo methods" desecrating the justice of the Republic, and menaced

Ségurat with a hunger strike if Claire were not released.

Visseleux, the lean dry string bean who represented Angela, employed other tactics. Ségurat's brutality and class discrimination, he warned, were arousing the conscience of the world. Telegrams of support had poured in from toiling comrades everywhere. A monster demonstration was being organized among the housemaids of Paris to coincide with the arrival from Korea of a germ-inspection committee. Speakers would present Comrade Lepeyron's case, the latest victim of the fascist repression that held Tours in its iron grip.

Driven beyond endurance, the wretched magistrate telephoned Fiori. When the Corsican's voice came on, Ségurat said: "Listen, Fiori, you've got to do something. You've got to break the Montenoy case. They're hot on my trail. Twenty-two years of service at stake. All because of a rotten bitch. . . ." He paused, listening to dead air. "Fiori, did you get me? Fiori!"

After a moment the calm remote voice of the Corsican replied, "Yes, I understand. Don't get in a panic. I'm arranging a little party. Are you free tomorrow night?"

"Fiori, this is hardly the time——"

"Oh, it's just a small affair, magistrate," the voice came through cold planetary space. "Just you and I and maybe a third, the guest of honour. We'll meet at the château. I'll pick you up at nine-thirty."

Ségurat was intrigued. "What's it all about, Fiori? Another intuition?"

"You'll see. Meantime, keep cool." Fiori rang off.

The following evening, promptly at nine twenty-nine, the squat black squad car drew up at the magistrate's bungalow in the residential section of Tours. Leblond was at the wheel, young and sleepy-eyed; Fiori slouched in the back. "Get in, magistrate." He glanced at his watch. "We've got a date at ten. Step on it, Leblond."

The magistrate turned to his companion in the dark. "Who are we meeting?"

Fiori tapped a cigarette. "Maybe no one. Maybe the man we've been looking for."

They sped through the flat black countryside where an occasional light winked from a lonely farmhouse and the moon shone down, bright and cold. Leblond hit it up to sixty, crouched over the wheel, the headlights cutting a ribbon through the night. They rocketed from side to side. Fortunately, the road was little travelled at this hour. Fiori sat slumped in the corner, quietly puffing, hat cocked over one eye. He roused only when they saw the huge battlemented towers of Plessis glooming at them through rustling shadows of chestnut and lime.

Fiori leaned forward and tapped Leblond on the neck. "Leave us at the gate," he said. "This is a private affair."

They got out, and Fiori told Leblond to take the squad car down the road a few hundred yards. "Come back in forty-five minutes," the commissioner ordered. They crept to the wall surrounding the park. "Up and over," Fiori said. The magistrate hoisted his heavy bulk atop the wall, floundered for an instant like a porpoise out of water, and dropped with a crash on the other side. Fiori joined him with a deft catlike motion. "You'll never make a poacher, Ségurat." Ségurat grunted. He had little taste for nocturnal adventures.

They prowled through the velvet darkness. Ahead, the lawn windows of the château were a blaze of light. Fiori led the way to the service entrance. He fumbled for a moment with the lock. Suddenly the door gave and they stood in the narrow pantry corridor. Fiori flashed his pocket torch, a red-hooded light. "This way," he whispered.

They found a door and a small service stair. Quietly, they mounted. On the second floor they emerged into a tall black corridor. Fiori groped along the wall and opened another door. He beckoned with the red lamp.

They stood within the death chamber of the baron.

Ségurat looked about uneasily. "What do you expect, Fiori? A revelation from Heaven?"

The Corsican chuckled. "I expect a visitor, but not an angel." He turned. "Here, the wardrobe will do. We can squeeze in." He opened the sliding door of the vast cedar closet where, row on row, mute evidence of remorseless fate, hung the baron's for ever unnecessary suits. They slipped inside, breathing the close woolly air laden with moth-balls.

"That housekeeper certainly looked after the old man's clothes," Ségurat whispered.

"Ah, she had her uses." Fiori laughed softly. He seemed in excellent humour.

The minutes passed in black interminable silence. Once the Corsican looked at his watch. "Ten-fifteen," he whispered. "Our friend is late."

They waited, the air getting stuffier, both men cramped and crouching. Suddenly Ségurat clutched the policeman's arm. "I think a door opened," he whispered. They heard the click of the light switch. Fiori gave a deep satisfied "ah!"

In the centre of the room, beneath a blaze of light, stood the jovial president of the Courbevoie chemical works. He raised ironical brows. "Really, gentlemen! An unexpected pleasure, or did you just happen to be passing by?"

"Never mind the cracks, Tramillet," Ségurat began in a loud magisterial tone. "What are you doing here?"

"That, dear fellow," Charles replied, "is precisely what I was about to ask you."

"We are investigating a murder," Ségurat announced pompously.

"And this line of attack?" the industrialist observed. "Or do you perhaps expect a revelation from the soul of the deceased. I had not known our police were addicted to spiritualism."

Ségurat turned turkey-red. He commenced to splutter. Fiori stepped forward. "Monsieur Tramillet, you have received a note?"

"Note? What are you talking about?"

Fiori nodded and plunged a hand in his cavernous pocket. He fluttered a scrap of white paper. "Tonight at ten. The baron's chamber. A friend will help you arrange a little slip committed the day of the crime."

For the first time the industrialist lost a little of his aplomb. "What sort of game are you playing, Fiori? These childish tricks! I'm going to speak to my attorney."

"Waa-aa-it a minute," the Corsican drawled. "If this was so childish, why did you pay any attention to it?"

Charles stared. "Naturally, I wished to discover the identity of this person so concerned with me and with the case."

"But you said nothing to the police?" Fiori pressed.

He shrugged. "Why should I? Perhaps it meant nothing. Time enough to bring the police in afterwards."

He looked at them contemptuously. "You're trying to rig a case against me to cover your own failure. It's absurd. Almost anyone in the house had more motive than I."

Fiori gave him a long reflective look. "You had an expectation of ten millions," he said gently.

"Ten millions!" Charles cried. "What of it? I am not a beggar. I have my factory at Courbevoie."

Fiori smiled. "Not quite so prosperous just now. A Casino girl is an expensive morsel. Sometimes even two millions can look like the moon when a man is desperate."

The thrust went home. The big fellow turned pale. His shoulders sagged. "I don't know what the devil you're talking about!" he said. "You sound like a concierge."

Fiori's black glance bored into the protesting face. "I think you do know." He turned to Ségurat. "We want Tramillet to come along to the Villesec house."

Ségurat nodded. "It's your show, Fiori," he growled.

Charles looked at them defiantly. "Why should I go? I'm not under arrest."

Fiori raised a gloved hand. "But certainly not. We would like you to come in the interest of justice. Your presence may be valuable." His voice purred.

"Oh, in that case——"

They sped through the shuttered village. At the small white house nestling in a lane, Leblond pulled up. With a sulky grunt, Charles got out. He was followed up the flowered walk by Fiori and the magistrate. Five minutes of persistent hammering brought a shuffle of steps and a blade of light through a cautious crack. They glimpsed the long suspicious nose of the Count of Villesec.

"Open, Monsieur. We have a search warrant." Fiori spoke crisply. The moonlight gleamed on the boot-shaped brass knocker. Thierry drew back the door. His eyes

narrowed at the sight of Charles. "You put them up to this!" he whispered hoarsely.

Charles brushed him off, like an unpleasant insect. "You're talking rot. I don't know any more than you. Don't stand there like a blithering idiot. Turn on the lights!"

Fiori intercepted a glance of hatred between the brothers-in-law as the lights came on. He smiled and went on into the drawing-room. The Villesecs grand salon was a dingy brown-papered room with a huge violet lampshade and a barricade of uncomfortable little gilt chairs. The only flash of colour was a brilliant mask of a Polynesian god glued to one wall. It was this crimson and yellow grimace that immediately attracted Fiori.

Ségurat came up behind the policeman. "What in the name of God is that horror?"

"That was God Bobo," Fiori replied. "He's the particular divinity of head-hunters in the South Seas. Look." He pointed to a hideous fetish beside the mask. A small green tube shaped like a pipe-stem hung just below. "I'll lay you odds that tube holds curare."

"Curare?" The magistrate peered at the fearsome head.

Fiori nodded. "The native warriors use it on their darts. It's a deadly poison. Produces reactions like strychnine. Well!" He swung round.

Thierry stood in lavender gloom athwart the gigantic shade. He sniffed: "If Monsieur will kindly tell me the purpose of his call?"

"A fine mask, Count," Fiori said cheerfully. "It's a real collector's item. Too bad you have no heads to go beside the god."

The Count of Villesec trembled with rage. His uncombed reddish nest of hair stuck straight up like a

rooster's comb. "Monsieur, you will please——" he choked.

"Old Dandillot knew what he was about when he picked that souvenir for you," Fiori continued imperterbably. "Why, you could probably get a thousand for such a mask in Paris."

No one said anything. The Count teetered on his toes, while the reluctant Charles drearily contemplated a small table loaded with devotional tracts. Ségurat gave Fiori an inquiring look, as if signalling: a little more light, please.

"Father Pierre Dandillot," Fiori intoned as if reading from a card file, "graduate of the Jesuit Seminary at Orléans with a mission among the savage tribes of Sulu. Five years' labour in the jungle, the only white man among hundreds of blacks. At present recovering from a severe bout of tropical fever in a Jesuit rest-house at Dordogne." He raised a dramatic finger, staring at the sullen Count. "This Jesuit missionary is the good friend of Monsieur de Villesec, whom he visited on the return from the East. This little beauty,"—he tapped the hideous mask—"of a gift from the good father, complete with fetishes and curare."

Thierry looked furiously from one to the other. He retreated a step. "It is a crime, then, to receive visits from a Jesuit priest? What concern is this of the police?"

Fiori's black eyes gleamed. "We are interested in everything about you, Monsieur de Villesec. We began with your studies in this same Jesuit seminary at Orléans where you became the friend of Pierre Dandillot." He turned and plucked the tube of poison from the wall. "We'll borrow this. An analysis should prove interesting. Meantime, perhaps you can explain what you have done with the other vial."

"There isn't any other vial!" Thierry spluttered.

"Oh, no?" Fiori shook his head gently. "Not quite good enough, Count. It's not likely in the little town of Plessis to find a sudden outbreak of head-hunters. The analysis will prove the poison that killed Baron de Montenoy came from kind Father Dandillot."

"Absurd! Outrageous!" the Count fumed. "I want to talk to a lawyer."

"Certainly." The policeman nodded. "For the present, you can come along with us."

"You are arresting me? What for?"

Fiori drew a deep breath. "For the murder of Baron Stephen de Montenoy!"

XVIII

THE arrest of the Count of Villesec created a sensation. Impromptu debates were held on the street corners of Plessis. The Count had never been popular, but some people felt he was incapable of murdering anyone. Others, mostly of the free-thinking radical kind, hailed the arrest as laying bare the hypocrisy beneath religious vestments. Visseleux had organized a monster demonstration on behalf of "Comrade Lepeyron" with cooks and housemaids from all over the district and a Red Fighters' drum and bugle corps; Marescaux about to lead a delegation of ageing legionnaires and out-of-work deputies to the Ministry to request an immediate investigation of justice in Tours; both of these worthies suddenly found their publicity campaigns superfluous and their clients on the verge of liberation.

Even Tania, after firing a final Parthian bolt of irony, admitted that results had at last been obtained. She compared Ségurat to the bewildered captain of a rudderless ship, buffeted by changing winds, that had at last by luck managed to reach port. Abandoning for once zoological comparisons, Tania depicted the magistrate standing at a crazily swinging helm, peering into a gale and muttering, "Where? Where? Where?"

These gibes failed to stir Ségurat as before. He had triumphed, though to be sure most of the credit belonged to Commissioner Fiori. It was also true that the Count of

Villesec obstinately persisted in his denial of guilt and accused the police of having framed him. The sole ground of suspicion, Thierry asserted, was his poverty and his relationship to a rich man. Ségurat eagerly awaited the results of the analysis to overcome any remaining doubts.

Two days later Fiori sent in a confidential report to the magistrate. Ségurat read it with puckered brows. After a moment of thought, he reached for the telephone. "Get me the Montenoy château," he barked. "I want to speak to Monsieur Charles Tramillet."

Promptly at the appointed hour, the industrialist presented himself in Ségurat's office. The brusque hearty aspect of Tramillet had utterly changed. The "jaws," as the château staff had dubbed him in tribute to his gastronomic powers, looked weary and dishevelled as if he had passed sleepless nights.

Without preliminaries, Tramillet launched an angry protest against this abrupt summons. "Look here, Monsieur Ségurat, how long is this foolishness to continue? I've already been put through the third degree by your bloodhound Fiori. I've told you everything I know. I'm a little sick of these interviews."

Ségurat fixed the other with a shaggy stare. He had the appearance of enthroned justice thundering from the clouds. "Our investigation, Monsieur, is finished. Certain aspects point directly towards you."

Charles wrinkled his nose. "What aspects?"

"First, you are in an embarrassing financial position."

"Yes—so what?"

"There is a particular obligation which worries you

constantly." The magistrate paused. He leaned forward and spoke in a measured tone. "You are keeping a woman. She has threatened to leave you unless you clear her debts. For this, you need two millions."

Charles gave a sarcastic smile. "Oh, come now. You're here to administer the law, not to give lectures in morality. Since when has it been a crime in France to keep a mistress?"

Séguarat raised a blunt finger. "I do not speak of morality. It is your behaviour the twenty-four hours before Montenoy's death that concerns us. You knew all about Angela's past. It was you who warned the baron. Yet, despite this, you permitted her to stay another day when everyone insisted that she go. I'll tell you why. Because the presence of this woman provided you with a convenient suspect."

Charles snorted. "More fantasies! You're trying to make a case on pure hypothesis." He folded his arms. "I'm not doing any more talking until I've seen a lawyer."

The magistrate picked up a sheet of paper covered with chemical symbols. "Here is the result of the analysis. It proves beyond question that the poison which killed Baron de Montenoy came from the missing vial of curare."

Charles shrugged. "What if it does? How does that concern me? The Count of Villesec knows a lot more about these vials than I do."

Séguarat scanned the report. "The poison in the tube is precisely the same, under analysis, as the poison in the digitalis. Both are of the strychnine variety and have been extracted from the Calabar plant. This extract is generally employed by head-hunters of Guinea and other savage tribes to smear their darts. A few drops of this deadly

liquid is sufficient to cause an agonizing death, with violent nausea, intense thirst and heavy convulsions."

He put down the paper. Charles had gone pale. His eyes held a glazed stare. He swayed a little. Ségurat regarded him grimly. "Not a pleasant way to die," he remarked.

Struggling for control, Charles cried: "Why don't you talk to Villesec? The stuff belonged to him!"

The magistrate looked at the man writhing before him, the man who had felt the sudden spring and crunch of steel jaws. "We suspected Villesec. Especially when he lost his head and denied the existence of another tube. But we know now we were wrong." He sighed. One hand strayed across his desk; there was a faint lonely buzz in the corridor. "You're smart, Tramillet. But you overlooked one little thing. You left your prints on the digitalis container."

Silence blared between them. Charles looked around and suddenly flung out, "Of course, I did. I brought it to Claire."

Ségurat shook his head. His voice hammered at the other. "It's no use. The container was *wrapped*. We checked the druggist in Tours. You removed the paper during that stop at Villesec's house. Then you wrapped the tube again and gave it to Claire. Why did you remove the paper? To pour in the curare taken from Villesec!"

The magistrate's chair crashed against the wall. Ségurat dropped behind the desk. The door swung open. Fiori stood on the threshold. There was a wink of blue metal in his hand. "I wouldn't try it, Monsieur," he said gently.

Charles remained frozen, half out of his chair, one hand plunged in his breast pocket.

XIX

CLAIRE was on her way to Grippelet's office. Released from custody the day before, she seemed little the worse for her month-long detention. She was wearing a light grey suit with blue lapels and facings, and her long blonde hair shone like gold silk in the sun. In one hand she carried a black leather bag and in the other a bouquet of early spring flowers, the parting gift of "Papa" Marescaux, who had become fond of his pretty client. Even Achille Séguurat had mellowed, giving Claire a handshake and expressing the hope that the food had been satisfactory.

The girl entered the fly-blown offices of the old notary. He came wheezily to meet her, one bear-like paw outstretched. "Good-day, my dear. This is a happy occasion." He peered around his cluttered office, guided his visitor to a deep leather chair.

She waited a little nervously while he fussed and pawed among his papers. "A very happy occasion," he wheezed. He extracted a single sheet of ruled notepaper which she recognized at once as containing the testament dictated by Stephen the night of his death. Old Grippelet adjusted his pince-nez. "Permit me to inform you, Mademoiselle Grandjean, that you are now the indisputable mistress of the Château of Plessis-St. Jean with all the income, appurtenances, and tenant holdings thereof. In addition——" he droned happily through a recitation of the

various sub-properties of the estate and a list of the bonds and mortgages in the baron's strong-box. It all added up to a great deal of money, more money than the young girl had ever dreamed of.

After a moment she managed to say, "It's all mine?"

"All yours, my dear," he replied, beaming.

They drove out to the château in Grippelet's ancient Citroën, which spluttered and rattled along the highway like some early experiment of the machine age. During the drive Claire was thoughtful. She said little, looking at the green Touraine country as it emerged from the white shining day. When, at last, they reached the great iron gates with the flamingo crest of Montenois, she turned with an air of decision. "Monsieur Grippelet, I should like your advice."

He nodded gravely. "Yes, my dear. Certainly."

She considered. "I wish to carry on the château in the old way; Françoise, the old servants, all the tenants. And those personal legacies, the gifts to Amelia and the others, the money for Françoise, the contribution to the community chest; yes, even the poor priestly Villesec, I think Stephen would like me to carry out those bequests, And you've done so much for us both. Could you arrange it for me?"

He looked at her, moved and astonished. "Why, Mademoiselle Claire. It's really good." He took out a bright handkerchief, blew his nose. "Yes, you deserve good fortune. One doesn't meet with such gentleness nowadays."

"Let's go in," she said, descending from the exhausted car.

In the first hall Christine was polishing the mahogany stair-rail. She dropped her rag, stood open-mouthed. "Mademoiselle Claire!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, it's me," Claire said, advancing. "How are you. Christine?" She gave the maid a squeeze.

Christine turned. "I'm going to tell the others." She ran towards the kitchen, crying. "It's Mademoiselle! It's Mademoiselle!"

Amelia and Jerome came in, sweating, from the garden. The old woman carried a basket of freshly dug potatoes. "My dear, my dear," she kept saying, while Jerome stood grinning behind her.

Claire extended her arms. "I've come home," she said, a quiver in her voice.

In the background, old Grippelet coughed and cleared his throat. "Now, now," he said. "I'm sure you're pleased to see Mademoiselle Claire. We have a little business waiting. Come into the salon." They followed the notary into the grand drawing-room, the scene of so many piqué games and the flowering of not a few seductions in the old days. Now all the furniture wore dust-covers and the blinds were drawn, letting in a few hushed golden splinters of morning.

Grippelet turned. There was a suspicious moisture at the corners of his eyes. "I know you've been worried about the future. When the master goes, sometimes everything goes. But you don't need to worry any more. I can put you at ease. Plessis has a new mistress." He paused, surveying them through his pince-nez. They hung breathlessly on every word. He took Claire's hand, bowed. "Your new mistress is Mademoiselle Claire Grandjean, the heiress of Plessis!"

There was a murmur of approval. Amelia began to dab at her eyes with the corner of her apron.

Grippelet held up his hand. "Mademoiselle Grandjean has asked me to tell you that she wants everything to continue as in the past. And especially she wants you to remain with her and give the same faithful service you have always done."

Claire broke in, a flush on her cheeks. "Monsieur Grippelet has exactly expressed my wish. I can't thank you enough for all your kindness in the past. It's meant more than I can say. I know how you felt about Stephen. And I know I am carrying out what he would wish when I ask you to stay with me and to regard Plessis as your home."

"Ah, Mademoiselle, Mademoiselle," Jerome murmured. The two women were wiping their eyes.

Grippelet took off his pince-nez and wiped them vigorously. "There is more," he said. "Your master remembered you in his first will. He left each of you a million. Mademoiselle has instructed me that she desires these legacies carried out."

The servants, looking at one another speechlessly, turned to Claire. The women raised their hands in dumb gratitude. Jerome shook his head. "Too kind. We don't know how to thank you. It's too much, eh, Amelia?"

The girl smiled at them, all gold and blue and lovely, a worthy mistress. "All I wish is to see Christine in my room with breakfast, to know that Amelia is in her kitchen and Jerome in his garden. Do you agree?"

Amelia came forward, tears on her wrinkled cheeks. She made an awkward little curtsy. "I don't know how to say it. I can't tell you. For us, you will always be our Mademoiselle."

Claire embraced the old woman. "That's all I want," she said. She stepped back, looking around the dim salon.

"And now, Plessis must live again. Open these shutters! Remove the covers! We'll let the sun in!"

The next morning Claire awoke with a pang of joy. She was home again in the familiar blue and ivory room. She snuggled happily in the bed, awaiting the arrival of Christine with the breakfast tray. In a few moments she heard a knock.

"Come in, Christine."

But it was Amelia with a heavy step and a faintly worried look.

"Amelia!" Claire exclaimed.

The cook set down the tray and turned to her mistress. "Excuse me, Mademoiselle, I wanted to see you here the way you was before. You don't know how I prayed for this moment when you were in that place. And now to see you back again——" She was beginning to cry.

"Amelia," Claire said gently. "Let's not think of it. We're together now."

The old woman nodded. "Excuse me, dear. I have something to say, a bit of advice from an old woman." She faltered, looked around. "Oh, I know you're young and clever. You don't need to be told what's right. But I been thinkin' about you all night. Just as if you was my own. I thought of you alone here in this great house and no one to watch out for you or protect you."

Claire raised herself on her pillows. She gave the old woman a puzzled glance. "Protect me from what, Amelia?"

"Men!" the cook said hoarsely. "I know what they are, young and old. They're all alike. They'll be after you like flies around the honeypot. You're too good for them. Any of them!"

Claire smiled. "I've been burned once," she said. "I shall take care it won't happen again." She sank back on the pillows, a mischievous light in her eyes. "All the same, someone is coming here soon to live."

Amelia jumped. "Someone coming here? Oh, merciful God! Who, Mademoiselle?"

"Guess."

"Oh, Mademoiselle!" Amelia gave a distracted glance.

"It's Françoise," the girl said softly.

"That one!" Amelia sighed. "Our Françoise that was sent away. Ah, I shall give her a welcome!"

Claire nodded. "I've written to the school. She will return in a few days. After all, she belongs to Plessis too." Her voice fell. She looked away. "Stephen wanted me to take care of her."

The old woman trembled with tears and happiness. "Ah, Mademoiselle, how good you are! How good!"

Claire had a slight thoughtful smile. "I'm lucky," she said. "I've a family again." She sat up. "Now hand me the tray, please!"

She turned towards the window to see again, as on all those hundred mornings of the past, where the Loire like a silvery necklace gleamed upon the sunlit bosom of Touraine. . . .

